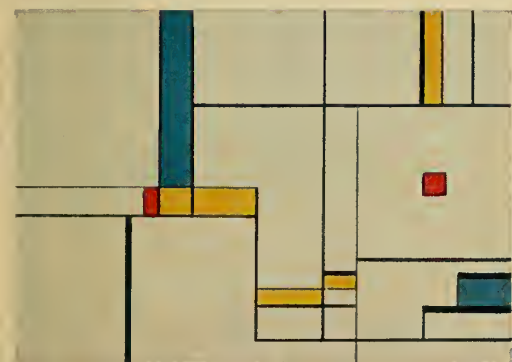
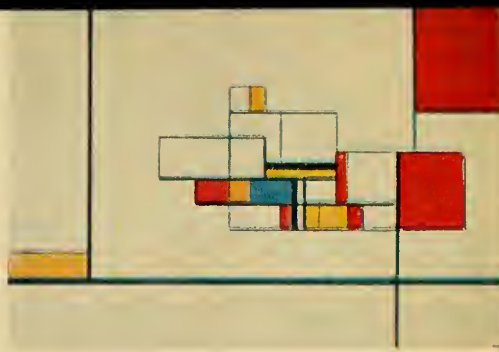
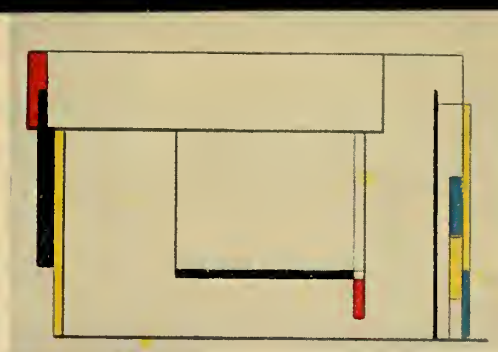


HYPOCRISY ABOUT ART

And What You Don't Gain By It

a constructive debunking of popular superstitions, by Theodore L. Shaw



Hypocrisy About Art

by Theodore L. Shaw

A cold, hard — even iconoclastic book?

Perhaps, but only to the extent that it puts into words what most of us have subconsciously known for a long time — that art isn't at all the romantic and rather flossy concept we were brought up to think it was — but something very different and much more practical. Too many things have been happening in the world lately for art to remain in its ancient and somewhat naive aloofness from reality.

\$4.95

STUART PUBLICATIONS

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HYPOCRISY ABOUT ART

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And what you don't gain by it

THEODORE L. SHAW



THE HILLA VON REBAY FOUNDATION
77 MORNINGSID DRIVE
GREENS FARMS, CONNECTICUT 06436

Stuart Publications
Boston

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Much of the material in the first few chapters of this book originally appeared in the magazine, CRITICAL.



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Chapter I

Art's Sleep-Walkers

That a man's own brain can be a tyrant from which he does well to make his escape — at least occasionally — is a widely held doctrine. In achieving the escape, he frees himself, we are told, from a fatalistic sense of his own futility, from too rigid a materialism and the consequent wear and tear of his inferiority complex; all highly desirable accomplishments no doubt.

Let us not delve too deeply into whether his escape is actual or illusory, whether, after all, it is not his brain which (though secretly and from behind the throne) is suggesting to him that he attempt the escape — and his brain also which eventually draws him back into renewed obedience to itself when the benefits from the escape (such as they are) seem to have lost their pleasurable flavor. Let us merely bear in mind that a deliberate blacking out of thought, no matter how admirable its purpose, must not demand too much, nor last too long, or we revolt against it; just as the sleep-walker, though he may maintain his slumber-state through certain routine meanderings, can by no means hold out as he comes into collision — and eventually he must — with obstacles of greater and greater disturbing force — culminating, perhaps, with a tumble into the swimming pool.

What I am leading up to is that man is now deeply involved in a certain one of these "mental swoons" which has been atrociously over-prolonged.

It is dragging him along so rough a road and bumping him into such a multitude of shin-breaking contradictions and nonsensicalities that the effort to stay semi-comatose inside it is nearing the impossible. I refer to that astounding achievement of self-hypnosis by which man induces himself to believe that art is "inexhaustible" — that this, that or the other art work, created by a fellow-inhabitant of our smallish planet, is "immortal" or "timeless" or "imperishable" and will "live forever."

Once it could be done, perhaps. There was a day when almost any occult and intriguing humbuggery — voodooism, horoscopy, devil-casting, alchemy and a score of others — could and did flourish. And of course under such circumstances the supposed inexhaustibility of art slid by easily enough with the rest.

Each advance in education, however, has made it more difficult. Biology and geology killed the concept of an un-evolved man born as-is into a recently (and magically) created earth. Astronomy abolished the notion of our planet as the central point of a much larger, but otherwise insignificant, uni-

verse. And finally (and worst of all) the atomic age burst forth, presenting us with the actuality — rather than the mere fiction — of space travel; accompanied by the imminent and awesome prospect of visits to and from other worlds.

To insist upon retaining, after such happenings, our previous (and always decidedly hopped-up) certitude that *Hamlet*, *Pastoral Symphony* and *Nude Maja* will be important in the year 12,000 demands an effort of blind-credulity — a numb ignoring of every impact with reality — which is beyond human capacity of retaining.

Yes, beyond human capacity. I assert it firmly, despite your reminding me that critics are still adhering doggedly to the idea, and are, in fact, hurling rhapsodies at us about the eternal beauty of their favorite poems, plays, symphonies, operas, paintings, sculptures or cathedrals with greater fervor than ever.

For it must be remembered (to account for their behavior) that the doctrine of the inexhaustibility of an art work is not a minor tenet in their credo (which critics could toss overboard without much harm done) but its foundation stone. Their authority rests upon it. Unless they can make us believe that an art work attains and *holds* a certain enduring goodness (or badness) then their evaluations obviously are merely temporary and therefore fallacious.

Rather than swamp you (and I could easily do it) with a myriad quotations illustrative of how frantically they are still fighting the battle for inexhaustibility I shall present you with only two.

I have selected these particular ones because they are not from casual newspaper reviews but from broadcasts by especially well-known critics, channeled to large audiences as parts of systematic educational programs — intended to advance the public's knowledge of the Fine Arts.

Mr. Leonard Bernstein, director of the Philharmonic Orchestra, recently referred to Gershwin's

HYPOCRISY A

A hypocrisy rarely dies of old age. It dies of things that are done to it. The one about art being immortal, for instance, is being killed now by a series of "accidents" which could have occurred at almost any time in history, but chanced to occur in this century.

Before that, as you know, most of the world's supposedly "immortal" art works were hard to get at. Their "beauty" was protected by the rareness of the average man's having a chance to experience them. Either they were too expensive for him or too far away. Then some extraordinary inventions were made and all this was changed — so that now, with radio, television, phonograph records, color reproductions and so on, there is hardly a painting, a musical composition or a book of which he cannot obtain whatever degree of perception he desires — up to a surfeit of them.

With the result that which art works happen to survive nowadays depends on luck more than on anything belonging to the art works themselves.

No doubt other art works will be created which may temporarily acquire a similar scarcity — and attraction — but now that man has had this lesson so emphatically taught him it may be more difficult for anybody to make him think again that they are immortal.

Hypocrisy A is no worse than any other. Hypocrisies B, C, D, E and the rest will be treated in their turn.

Rhapsody in Blue as an “immortal experiment”.*

And Mr. Brian O'Doherty, under the sponsorship of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, similarly declared** Caravaggio's painting, *Poppies in a Wine Flask* (See Figure 1) to be “inexhaustible.”



Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 1: *Poppies in a Wine Flask*, by Caravaggio.

Possibly you will charge me with putting too much emphasis on a couple of harmless exaggerations. Why shouldn't they dress up their enthusiasms with a touch of theatricality? What's the difference?

Oceans of difference! !

I have already pointed out that “inexhaustibility” is the key trick in the critic's bamboozling of you. It's his foot inside your door. Once you admit him, you're done for. An army of pestilential camp-followers storm in and take you over.

Inasmuch as I have abundantly shown elsewhere how seemingly intelligent men succumb to this invasion — how they are able, that is, to make themselves believe that certain art works are completely *immune* to tiring simply because they hold out extra firmly *against* that tiring, I shall cite you only one example here.

It started as a reaction to a very sensible (except to critics) comment by Edgar Allan Poe, as follows: —

“The most exquisite pleasures grow dull in repetition. A strain of music enchants; heard a second time, it pleases; heard a tenth, it does not displease. We hear it a twentieth and ask

ourselves why we admired; at the fiftieth, it induces ennui — at the hundredth, disgust.”

Appalled at Poe's reckless release of the cat from the bag a well known critic* came up with this amazing and supposedly knock-down answer: —

“I hope it is not true. In any case, his account of the matter does not agree with my own experience. I think he was mistaking the frequent for the commonplace. Even the constantly recurring Sunrise and Sunset, for instance, loses none of its charm by repetition; nor, to take a lower instance, is the hundredth strawberry less pleasant to the taste than the first — if you avoid surfeiting.”

I suggest that you pause here a moment and ask yourself to what state of mental paralysis a man must have been reduced who could seriously defend his case with such an “argument.”

Isn't “surfeiting” exactly the problem being considered! !

And isn't it obvious, also, that if sunrises and sunsets of the type which we so frequently see anywhere in the world, should hereafter become visible only once a year and only from a single mountaintop in the Adirondacks, say, tourists would flock theretowards on that day in such multitudes as would soon convince this writer that sunrises and sunsets *do* lose charm by repetition — very markedly!

Well, this ought to be enough to show you, I think, the cerebral decomposition you may be headed for if the deadly germ of “inexhaustibility” gains lodgement in your brain cells.

However, despite their unfortunate lapses, I shall not accuse either Mr. Bernstein or Mr. O'Doherty with having reached the advanced stages of the disease that Poe's antagonist has.

Mr. Bernstein would react with extreme disfavor, I am sure, if anybody should ask him to prove that *Rhapsody in Blue* would never go stale by having an assistant always at his elbow playing the composition on a portable phonograph. And Mr. O'Doherty would revolt with equal vigor if it were suggested that he demonstrate the “inexhaustibility” of Caravaggio's painting by concentrating on it the entire decorative impact of his living quarters. (See Figure 2)

Going to any such extremes of self-justification would seem ridiculous to both of them, no doubt. Yet that is what their statements really demand of them, is it not? For surely they would not take refuge — as Mr. Graham did — in the phrase “if you avoid surfeiting.”

Now again — lest you accuse me of making too much of a triviality — let me concede that a romanticism of this kind may be pardonable under certain (rare) circumstances.

On the other hand, the proclaiming of it over television as part of an educational program, when listeners assume that the speakers want to be taken seriously, is highly objectionable. It misleads rather than teaches.

And incidentally — assuming you have a sadistic streak somewhere in your make-up and occasionally enjoy watching other people suffer — there is a good chance here for you to indulge your regrettable proclivity. The next time a critic tells you an art work is “inexhaustible” ask him what he means

*On January 25, 1959, in a nationwide television broadcast.

**Over Station WGBH, February 9th, 1959.

*David Graham, in *Common Sense and the Muses*.



Figure 2: From the "inexhaustible" picture comes the "inexhaustible" decor.

by saying so. If you can pin him down to it (and it won't be easy) you will be treated to an exhibition of inept stammerings, botched "elucidations," clumsy flights into mystic moonshine and inane hair-splittings that will delight you. Even a husband explaining the scented handkerchief in his pocket will do a better job.

However, my protests against any art work being regarded as inexhaustible (or immortal) must not be interpreted as denying that some art works are exhaustible *more slowly* than others or are less likely to suffer that exhaustion.

Quite the contrary. In fact, it is exactly to the investigation and analysis of those different speeds and different likelihoods of exhaustion that critics should be devoting their time and energy if they are to do their job — that job being to help the rest of us derive the benefits from art which it is art's business to confer.

But do not draw the conclusion from this that I am switching the discussion to the *varying endurance* of art works.

Endurance, in the sense that critics use the term, doesn't belong in art any more than does Inexhaustibility.

No art work can really be regarded as possessing endurance unless man has a continuous and unremitting desire to perceive it throughout that period of its endurance.

As soon as he has voluntarily stopped looking at one painting and turned to the next, as soon as he

has finished a book and refrained from beginning to read it again, or listened to a phonograph record without immediately wanting to play it a second time, the concept of *endurance* has lost applicability. The factor of *rest through abstention* has entered the situation and cannot be denied.

To confer an award on an art work because of its having survived the so-called "test of time" is as senseless as to confer an award on an electric light bulb for "lasting power" simply because when we press the switch (after a lapse of ten years, perhaps) it chances to illuminate. We have to know how much it was used in the meantime.

If it agonizes you to adopt so unsentimental a viewpoint towards art you can reduce the pain of it by a very simple expedient — by giving every art work a dual nature — by letting it be simultaneously an aesthetic experience and a historical exploit. See it as alternating between these two natures. In one moment it is more important as an aesthetic experience for what it is making you *feel* or is *capable* of making you feel. In another (when you are temporarily sated of it) it is more important as a historical exploit — for what it *did* to you (or to all mankind) in the past.

These alternatings gradually fade out, of course, and the art work becomes less and less important as an aesthetic experience and becomes more and more a mere historical exploit. What else can you expect in a world of competition, where men not only *learn* from what an artist has done but imme-

diately (and naturally) strive to share his renown by imitations of it?

Every art work, to illustrate, is continually in a process of closer and closer approach to the status of the Wright Brothers' airplane, to which we give a place of honor in the Smithsonian Institute, as a tribute to an amazing human achievement, but would not care to fly in, since the sensation of flying may be so much more richly (and safely) sensed in an airplane of the present day. Or again, it approaches closer and closer to the status of *Pamela*, which we believe worthy of mention in history as "the first novel written in the English language," but would not care to read — except in a brief sampling of a few pages, "out of curiosity." Caravaggio's *Poppies in a Wine Flask* and Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, no matter how well they are holding out now, will eventually reach this same condition. Pretending otherwise is simply a form of naive self-delusion which exists partly

through man's love of romancing but more because it plays the critic's game.

However, the regarding of an art work as inevitably destined to achieve this status does not require that your admiration for it be abandoned. The admiration simply transmutes itself gradually from the fervid admiration you may have felt when the art work's potential for delighting you was still strong and frequent, into a more intellectual and reverential admiration when the art work has become as much as ninety per cent, say, nothing but an exploit. Under such conditions only the most unlikely turn of events can again give it importance as an aesthetic experience. For example, I cannot imagine anything which could give aesthetic importance to *Pamela* except a kind-hearted gaoler's tossing the book into the room where you had been held without anything to read for six months.

Inevitable as this transmutation seems to be, it
(Continued on page 6)

Determination to Stay Stupid!

Romance, Hero Worship, Sentimentality!

All very well in their places!

But not in education — not in any systematic effort to **understand** or **appreciate**.

The man who insists enthusiastically that art is immortal is a little like a ten-year-old boy who should refuse to "grow up" for fear he might not go on loving "Beauty and the Beast" forever.

He is failing to remind himself that in relation to men of five thousand years from now he himself is the ten-year-old boy — just as was the prehistoric Cro-Magnon man in relation to ourselves of today.

After all, what is necessarily so marvelous about the nineteenth or twentieth centuries?! Hundreds of them are coming.

However, it's your choice, and all I can do is present you a few sample statements, out of the million available (and not any more implausible than the rest) and let you decide how much compulsion you want to pile on your thinking apparatus in order to agree with what they say.

T. S. Eliot describes an excerpt from Dante as the "highest point that poetry has ever reached or ever can reach."

F. W. H. Myers declares that "No words that man can any more set side by side can ever affect the mind again like some of the great passages of Homer."

The well-known critic, Logan Pearsall Smith, says: "Most of all I envy the poet (Edmond Waller) who joined three words Go Lovely Rose so happily together that he left his name to float down through time on the wings of a phrase and a flower."

Immortality on three words!!

"Language greatly used has all the sanction of a sacrament; the race is as incapable of forgetting a great poem as it is of losing its last wish under the stars." John Ciardi, in *Saturday Review*, January 31, 1959.

"Both the aqueduct and the George Washington Bridge attain an undeniable and imperishable beauty." John P. Sedgwick, Jr., in *Art Appreciation Made Simple*.

"All passes. Art alone stays to eternity." Theophile Gautier.

"Will Hemingway pass the test of timelessness? There are several good reasons for thinking so. Most of his short stories . . . have the internal inevitability of masterworks; no one can imagine them happening some other way." *Time*, July 14, 1961.

I doubt the efficacy of this test. If Hemingway couldn't have thought of another denouement to his stories — and I think he could have — God could very easily have arranged it for him, and in an extremely natural manner.

"We think of words like dawn and dusk. They are beautiful in themselves, and still after long centuries of wide and continual use, untouched by time, as fresh as the day when they were minted. There is slowly spreading light in the word *dawn*, both in the sound and look of it. And the soft and stealthy darkening that is conveyed by *dusk* is not merely the mental reflex occasioned by the sight or sound of the accustomed symbol. As you look at it, as you hear it, you are aware of the perfect appropriateness of the word." J. Donald Adams, in *Literary Frontiers*.

Whimsies such as this can be dreamed up by the thousand — e.g., the wonderful guile and craft in the name, "Iago"; the power and force in "Hercules"; the whiteness in "Snow"; the greater suitability of the sun rising in the "East," etc. They are ninety-eight per cent nonsense.

"The longer one contemplates a picture by Braque (and by "contemplate" I mean literally "gaze upon") the more one finds in it. Its harmonies expand under one's gaze, deepening and widening, becoming ever more complex, more quiet and more alive." Patrick Heron in *Arts*, February, 1957.

"Yet we recognize his (John Marin's) full value anew each time, and at his best he is always more rewarding and inspiring than we had remembered, no matter how recently we have seen his work or how well we have known it." James Thrall Soby, *Contemporary Painters*.

Don't throw away this chance for an everlasting paradise! Draw up a chair and sit in front of a painting by Marin forever!!

"The world of books is the most remarkable creation of man. Nothing else that he builds ever lasts. Monuments fall; nations perish; civilizations grow old and die out; and after an era of darkness, new races build on others. But in the world of books are volumes that have seen this happen again and again, and yet live on, still young, still as fresh as the day they were written, still telling men's hearts of the hearts of men centuries dead." Clarence Day.

Allowing for a few dents and abrasions, my guess is that those "monuments", the Pyramids, might easily outlast any books Mr. Day might choose to name.

Well, as you see, there's some pretty heavy "believing" required of you to accept the correctness of these forecasts about what man will still admire a million or two years from now. Congratulations if you were able to summon it up.

In conclusion, here are three rather different ones, which I think, you will find it completely impossible to take seriously. The seed of their own destruction is right inside them.

"Novelty, adventure, variety, spontaneity, intensity — these are all very essential ingredients in a work of art; and a great work of art, like El Greco's Toledo at the Metropolitan, is one that presents this feeling of shock and delight, of new things to be revealed, at every encounter with it. Such works are inexhaustible in their meaning. But with one proviso: one must not go to them too often." Lewis Mumford, *Art and Techniques*.

Truly amazing, I think, even in criticism — that complete (and apparently unseen) self-contradiction in Mr. Mumford's last two sentences.

"The difference between the real and the false work of art, or between the good and the bad, is simply that the former repeatedly brings back beauty like Aladdin's lamp, whereas the latter becomes impotent to do so. A work which stirs us more than it is able to still us may thrill us once like a detective story which keeps us up half the night, but it cannot do it again, because its method is too crude and obvious. It is like a tobogganslide which one climbs up just to coast down; it takes too long to work up and the letdown is too fast to please a mature mind except in its puerile moods. . . . That is the nature of excitement, but is not the essential nature of art." Van Meter Ames, *Aesthetics of the Novel*.

What a flood of words to tell us what everybody already knows — that some things stay pleasurable longer than others. The fraud here lies in the critic's pretending that some great chasm exists, on one side of which are art works that repeatedly bring back beauty and on the other side those which become impotent to do so.

Actually — and I think obviously (as twenty seconds of calm thought would have been enough to demonstrate) there is only a gradual merging of one classification into the other, with no one spot where a dividing line between the two could be more correctly placed than another. The concoction of "chasms" like this is one of the critic's most favored tricks for fooling you, as I shall show you later.

It's through these inexcusable carelessnesses that you come to perceive not so much how wrong critics can be but that they are not really trying to be right.

"Canaletto . . . left hundreds of views of the inexpressibly lovely city (Venice)." John Canaday, in the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*.

Perhaps no tougher job faces the cold-blooded man than to be cold-blooded about Venice. Nevertheless, repressing sternly the more benovolent segments of his ego, he must still insist that the loveliness of Venice is eighty per cent due to its being the only city in the world constructed (for military reasons) on a large number of small and contiguous islands — thus creating a net-work of narrow canals. The existence of fifty (or even ten) other cities, similarly constructed, would cause a reduction in Venice's charm to a degree which let's refrain from estimating and let's hope won't happen.

As a like instance, let's say that if weird rock-formations and dimly-lit underground lakes, such as those shown in Figure 3 were available anywhere on earth then tourists



Figure 3, Cuevas Del Drach, Balearic Islands.

would hardly be thronging (as they are) to undertake arduous climbs down and up in order to perceive them in the Cuevas Del Drach, Mallorca. The loveliness of the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls is based on a similarly transient foundation. Unfortunately, and regardless of how much it breaks your heart, you are faced here with a force which operates through your and everybody else's life. One of the prime functions of this book will be to show how it affects art and how much you don't gain by pretending it doesn't.

(Continued from page 4)

can take place in a wide variety of ways, and you may find it interesting to run back through the ages and classify art works according to how long ago they completed the transmutation and at what speeds.

Or in the case of art works which have *not yet* completed the transmutation you may make guesses as to how far along in the transmutation they have progressed. For example, you can describe as . . .

Well along in the transmutation: *The Acneid*, *The Decameron*, *The Iliad*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Ereclina*, *Don Quixote*, *Vicar of Wakefield*, *She Stoops to Conquer*.

Part way along in the transmutation: Shakespeare's Plays as plays, *Moby Dick*, *Silas Marner*, *Volpone*, *School for Scandal*, *A Doll's House*, *Tom Jones*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Way of All Flesh*.

Still strongly resisting transmutation: *Robinson Crusoe* (selected portions), *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Treasure Island*, *Huckleberry Finn* (first three quarters), *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Turn of the Screw*.

An adoption of this mode of thought opens up (and legitimately, for a change) a basis for comparative evaluations which hasn't existed previously. Because once any two art works have lapsed into the status of historical exploits it is possible to compare one with the other — according to *what they did to mankind* — whether one of them happens to be a so-called "classic" like *Don Quixote*, which transmuted slowly, or a best seller like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which transmuted rapidly.

As to whether or not a decision is easy to make in the above case I shall not argue. But I assure that there are many times when it isn't.

* * * * *

Which brings us back to the critics again; and the question of what particular miracle would be required to transform them from what they are into something useful.

In addition to the methods I've already mentioned — namely, giving them an education and snapping them out of the fancy that art is inexhaustible — a *broadening of their personnel* might be effective. At present they are so colossally in-bred that if men could be classified by temperament into, say, twenty divisions and subdivisions, they would all fit neatly inside one of them — Category 17LQ perhaps — and not spill over.

There isn't a single tough, cold-blooded sceptic in the whole caboodle of them — not one relentless, hard-hitting iconoclast — not one Voltaire, Christopher Columbus, P. T. Barnum, Hogarth, Goya, J. P. Morgan, Houdini, Zola, Jack Dempsey or Ibsen.

With the natural result that instead of your getting the strong, aggressive, wide-ranging criticism which an art that's *meant for everybody* needs, you're bound to end up (and you do) with a diletantery, an emasculation, a soft soapery which I can best describe by saying that it would correspond with what you would get in drama if all plays were written by J. M. Barrie, or what you would get in poetry if all poems were composed by Joyce Kilmer.*

*This is not intended as a reflection upon the two artists named but merely to indicate a high concentration on one particular manner.

A *quota* of critics in this high-strung, hectic flavor of intuition and hunch may be acceptable — up to a proportion, say, of thirty or even fifty per cent in the total roster — as a first step in tapering down to a "normal" of six or eight per cent.

But when we observe them, as we do, strutting the quarter-deck, in complete control of the ship — when we observe, as we do, every newspaper, journal or magazine which issues critical evaluations at all, issuing them exclusively in the narrow and pretentious tone that is the trade-mark of this small clique of alleged oracles, that's when the situation becomes objectionable — and even dangerous.

And let me end up with two revealing and I believe truthful statements.

First. There are plenty of days in the lives of the world's most cultured and "appreciative" critics (it could easily be as many as two out of three thoroughly *normal* days) when nothing but being dragged by a bull-dozer would get one of them into a performance of any one of Shakespeare's Plays — or of a reading of extracts from them by Charles Laughton.

Second. A good half of these same mental giants couldn't be compelled — by anything short of a firing squad — to read again — on *any* day or under *any* circumstances whatever — those supposedly "inexhaustible" masterpieces of art: *The Odyssey*, *Paradise Lost*, *War and Peace*, Joyce's *Ulysses* or *Madame Bovary*. The boredom and fatigue of it would kill them.

But try to get them to admit it in print! There's nothing on earth that builds intellectual hypocrites with the speed and certainty of Criticism, as now being conducted.

Let No Dog Bark; We Are Not Amused

Whether or not certitudes exist in this world is a question about which it would be foolish to argue.

Most persons are convinced that they do. They insist, for example, that if you heat water sufficiently you can be sure it will boil, and that if you cool it enough it will inevitably freeze; they are equally positive that if you cut one finger off each of a normal man's hands he is left with only eight; and that if you cut off his head he unfailingly dies, because one head is all he ever has.

And so on. There is a long list of them.

The point that requires discussion, however, is not their *actuality*, (which we must concede) but how many of them we want around. A universality of them — their complete everywhere-ness, so to speak, and nothing else but — would make all kinds of trouble.

Certitudes cancel probabilities; and without probabilities (and their variations) what have you left?

Only the *dead sure* and the *completely impossible* remain; the whole exciting range between these two extremes (the zone of "if," "perhaps" and "it depends," etc.) is taken from you.

The incentive to figure things out, to take a lead off first base in the hope of stealing second; the incentive to "play a hunch" at the risk of a "tough break;" to defy Mrs. Grundy, and so on, would decline almost to the vanishing point under the inevitability of a single pre-ordained outcome.

What's the sense in throwing dice if only one number can come up! Why waste time drawing to a four-flush in clubs if there are only four clubs in the whole pack — the ones you already have! Get the idea? It's disheartening.

Hence our consternation on learning that certitude was pushing its way into an activity — call it a game if you like — wherein we had been pleasantly larking under the conviction that fortuities, good guesses, thin ice, jonahs, flukes, jinxes, long-shots and fighting-chances were firmly and enjoyably intrenched and could never be ousted.

The way the bad news came to us was from the first paragraph of an article by the well-known critic Granville Hicks.* Here it is — and we have italicized the few words which struck the blow.

"Everyone knows the first sentence of *Moby Dick* ('Call me Ishmael!'). It is one of the grand openings in fiction, dramatic, evocative, portentous. The three words, like the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, *cannot be reduced to banality by repetition; they still reverberate.*"

Now before we endeavor to bring home to you the full significance of Mr. Hicks' remark, allow us to give you a quick sketch of this activity of ours which we cherish so dearly and whose existence Mr. Hicks threatens.

It's a sort of literary criticism *in miniature*. Instead of analyzing the *entire works* of Shakespeare, Coleridge, Mae West, Walter Scott, Mark Twain, Al Jolson, Charles Lamb and other authors we direct our attention to short extracts from them — catchy phrases, pungent maxims, snappy comebacks, sagacious bon-mots, etc.

Some cases are very simple. Take those masterpieces of adroit and revealing wit, "tempest in a teapot" or "nobody else can know where the shoe pinches." Their merit — looking back historically — is unquestioned. To invent other combinations of words which would so aptly present the ideas intended would be extremely difficult. And yet not only are their authors forgotten but it is doubtful if any contemporary writer would venture to include the phrases in his script. The reason for their bad luck is manifest. They hit the nail on the head (there's another one!), but too hard and too often.

Yet who is to blame; ourselves or the originators? After all, what can an author do to prevent mankind from over-indulging in the dainties and regalements he supplies them. He naturally desires that his creations shall be taken notice of and quoted; but can he keep a string tied to them in order to control the *degree* of that taking notice and quoting. Does he even want to?

Mae West may not have objected to the speedy decline of "come up and see me sometime," because it lasted long enough to promote her subsequent plays and moving pictures. And similarly Thomas Riley Marshall's "what the country needs is a good five cent cigar" no doubt served its purpose, politically.

And it is even possible that Owen Wister when

deciding whether or not his "Virginian" should utter the words "when you call me that, smile," would by no means have been deterred from letting him do so by the knowledge that the words would eventually sink so deeply into triteness that no writer would dare resurrect them except for the purpose of scholarly research in an article such as this.

On the other hand, Shakespeare — assuming that he possessed the pretentious notions about "art" which critics ascribe to him (and we doubt it) — might have been greatly upset to learn of the fate which impended for his "a plague on both your houses." If told in advance that its decline would largely be due to its employment by one of our presidents he might very justly have exclaimed "harp not on that string, Mr. Roosevelt."

That it is often the merest accident which decides the degree of banality which accumulates on any phrase — whether created by Shakespeare or less known authors — seems indisputable.

Oscar Wilde's "I can resist everything except temptation" has become painfully commonplace, but Mark Twain's lengthier "I believe that our Heavenly Father invented man because he was disappointed in the monkey" still possesses freshness.

Shakespeare's "all the world's a stage," Walter Scott's "a sea of upturned faces," Queen Victoria's "we are not amused," Al Jolson's "you ain't heard nothing yet" are too short and are applicable to too many situations to escape being worn into triteness.

Charles Lamb's "the greatest pleasure I know is to do a good action by stealth and have it found out by accident," is saved from excessive wear by being overly long and involved, but the result, despite its truth and wit, is merely that it is neglected.

"Let no dog bark," as a sarcastic taunt directed against a bombastic and pompous speaker, is holding up especially well not only because the full passage . . .

I am Sir Oracle,
And when I ope my lips
Let no dog bark.

. . . is not widely known but because critics back away from quoting it on account of its aggravating their own guilt complex. Which — rather unfairly — piles that much more strain on its best substitute, "fourth of July orator."

This should be enough, we believe, to demonstrate how instructive may be a sojourn in this field of "literary criticism in miniature" and how all the more racking must have been our pain when Mr. Hicks cast his bomb-shell and annihilated it.

To illustrate just how his dictum necessarily has that effect let us turn to an analogy in the game of golf, to which we will assume you to be an enthusiastic addict. On a certain day your adversary produces what he calls his "magic putter" with which he claims it is impossible for him to miss any putt under thirty feet. You are, of course, merely amused by his whimsy. Whereupon, closing his eyes, and without examining the terrain, he gives a casual tap to his ball which immediately travels directly to the cup and drops in. But that isn't all; he follows up by facing away from the hole, taking a full swing, and driving the ball deeply into the rough — whence it gently rolls, shortly after, and again ends up in its prescribed destination.

*A Re-reading of *Moby Dick*, from the book, *On Great American Novels*, edited by Charles Shapiro.

What is the inevitable consequence? Only one thing can happen. As soon as the occurrence is confirmed and found to be unfailing, the game of golf terminates — and the courses where so many men once found pleasure and relaxation become available for real estate developments, town dumps or such other purposes as the national economy may suggest.

And let us assure you that if the certitude which Mr. Hicks pretends to have discovered — that is, if *Call Me Ishmael*, and the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony — really could not possibly be reduced to banality by repetition (no matter how much) then literary criticism, whether in the miniature version of it which we have discussed, or in its full scope, would suffer the same fate as golf. It would terminate — killed by certitude.

Inasmuch as the vulnerability of all art works to repetition has been amply demonstrated in the previous pages we shall allow you to imagine for yourself (and it should not be difficult) the particular combination of circumstances by which "Call me

Ishmael" could be reduced to the banality of "My kingdom for a horse," and the first four notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (or any four notes) to the banality of "How Dry I Am."

That which concerns us more is by what conceivable twist of thought a rational man can justify himself in enunciating so obvious a nonsensicality as that which Mr. Hicks proclaims with seeming firmness.

For we must remember that Mr. Hicks (unlike Mr. Bernstein and Mr. O'Doherty) is a *specialist* at his trade, the author of several books on criticism, and the once-a-week purveyor of an entire page of criticism in the *Saturday Review*.

There seems but one way to account for it; namely his complete commitment to a credo (that art is immortal) the abandonment of which would necessarily nullify and invalidate nearly everything he has written about art in his entire life. The last three words of his comment — "they still reverberate" — suggest, in their desperate effort to rationalize what he has said, — some such theory.

Chapter II

The Metropolitan Museum Lays an Egg

The fact that the frauds and deceptions which I shall endeavor to expose in this and the next few chapters are tied in with the Metropolitan Museum does not mean that they originated there. On the contrary they have been in circulation a very long time — often for centuries.

I have charged them against the museum first because the museum has sanctioned them by putting them into print and second because it has done so under the guise of *imparting an education*.

I am referring, of course, to the museum's *Seminars in Art*, a handsome and elaborate work in twenty four portfolios, accompanied by 288 "beautiful, full-color reproductions of the paintings discussed," and so on.

The seminars were written, not by members of the museum's own staff but by Mr. John Canaday, formerly chief of the Division of Education of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and (at this writing) Art Critic for the New York Times.

They are no doubt an ambitious effort in a worthy direction; and the museum (in its brochure) tries to prove their merit by saying that more than 200,000 persons have subscribed to them and that 96 per cent of the original subscribers elected to continue the course after receiving the first portfolio on approval. Which, to the museum is doubtless a gratifying response. However, a more logical response (in my opinion) would be of keen regret at seeing the museum disseminate to so large a number of trusting people an assortment of whimsies, superstitions, and unverified allegations the equivalent of which it would be difficult to find even in that field (art criticism) where such assortments are most richly present — thus tossing away a wonderful opportunity to have made itself useful.

Before I show you samples, let me emphasize again that the Metropolitan's seminars were presented to you not as a gossipy and easy-going "causerie" about its own pictures, but (to use the museum's own terms) as an educational program — a series of lessons, *for the purpose of teaching you to understand art*. It's supposedly a scholarly, professional job.

The course of instruction starts out by discussing four portraits of women. One of them is Ingres' portrait of Madame LeBlanc, reproduced in Fig. 4.

Mr. Canaday praises this picture as an "utterly charming portrait" and as a "suave disposition of shapes whose contours have been designed into linear delights" and so on, but finds fault with it



Figure 4: Madame LeBlanc, by Ingres

because it is *nothing more than that*. His complaint centers on the fact that the picture "makes no attempt to explore the personality of the sitter . . . it tells us nothing more about Madame LeBlanc than that she was a member of the prosperous upper middle class endowed with a certain pleasant combination of features."

Now let's be candid and state plainly that this ancient gag for testing the art or "goodness" of a portrait according to how much it explores or reveals the personality of the sitter is one of the rankest frauds in art criticism.

It is a *widely accepted* fraud, true. So much so that if you stand a while in front of nearly any famous portrait in a museum, the chances are that before long you will hear two or three earnest young people discoursing about how marvelously the artist has interpreted the character of the person portrayed.

From the glint the artist has put into his subject's eyes, from the shape of his nose, from the twist of his mouth, they will deduce every phase of the fellow's temperament down to whether or not he likes poodles.

"Isn't Bronzino (or Titian or Copley or Velasquez or Rigaud) wonderful the way he brings it all out," they'll exclaim enthusiastically. Unfortunately, they've been misled. It's all a humbug.

What actually started the regrettable practice, I believe, is that painting a portrait, say what you will, is ninety per cent just the putting on canvas of what the artist sees in front of him. It's a craft — like weaving a rug or cobbling a shoe — more exacting than most, but still a craft. Individual

techniques, styles, aptitudes and knacks are involved in the process, of course, but they cannot do more than slightly modify the above-mentioned high proportion of plain manual dexterity.

This has faced critics with a disconcerting prospect. Committed as they are to a ruthless contempt for what they call "mere craftsmanship" (Bougureau is awful; ditto Rosa Bonheur and David), what is there left for them to say, under such circumstances, about a portrait? You can't be very "arty" as to whether the painter produced a good likeness of the sitter. Some new criterion obviously had to be thought up, and it was, namely: did or did not the portrait reveal the sitter's personality?

Considering that it was concocted out of nothing, it got by well enough. It was conveniently vague, it opened a wide range for flashy talk, and it had just the right flavor for the budding connoisseur, eager for culture.

That does not alter the fact, however, that it collapses under the least analysis — and for two reasons.

The more important reason is that you *can't paint character into a face*. It just can't be done, no matter how fervently you may think otherwise — as I shall show you later.

The second reason is that even if you could paint character into a face the doing (or not doing) of it is useless as a criterion, for the surprising reason that it can't be made operative.

It turns out to be a blank, a cypher, a mirage. As soon as you try to use it, it disappears.

Imagine yourself confronted, for instance, with a certain Artist A's portrait of a certain Mrs. X. After running through your private assortment of ways to read character (hard eyes, soft eyes, mobile mouth, strong chin, etc.) you reach the conclusion, we will say, that Mrs. X is made to look like an amiable but rather narrow-minded egotist.

Okay; it's as good a guess as any, but where do you go from there?

Unfortunate Addiction

Like most other frauds this one about *faces revealing character* started a long while ago and has been kept alive by persons who benefited from it in their business. Arch offenders in the transgression are novelists. How convenient it is for them, when introducing a new character, to picture him for you as "sharp-featured", or "shifty-eyed" — or as possessing "sensually curved lips". It's the easy, economical way of simultaneously letting you know what he looks like and how you can expect him to act.

* * * * *

Many persons, I am afraid, will feel very badly if required to erase, from the list of their personal skills, their ability to read character in people's faces. If you are one of them, let me urge you not to look up the subject, Physiognomy, in your encyclopedia. It would disillusion you painfully.

Since you don't know Mrs. X,* you have no way of telling whether or not your reading of her character corresponds in the slightest degree with her actual character, nor do you have any way of telling whether or not those traits were observed by you as a result of Artist A's intentionally painting them there in order to reveal Mrs. X's personality. As far as you know they might have been equally (or even more clearly) readable from a photograph of Mrs. X. (Compare Figure 5). In which latter case, of course, all Artist A did was to produce, by means of oil colors, a photographically accurate representation of Mrs. X, the doing of which — to use the customary critical cant — is so low a form of art (mere craftsmanship!) as hardly to be art at all.**

Or second, if Artist A did (supposedly) alter or modify Mrs. X's facial expression and thus emphasize some particularity of her supposed character, you have no means of finding out that he has actually done so, or of learning whether he did it on purpose or by accident, or of deciding whether it indicates a true or false discernment of Mrs. X's character.

And if it is not a true discernment but simply an expression faked up (whether intentionally or not), then it proves nothing at all about Artist A's capacity to reveal (or explore) a sitter's personality.

Or, once more, if we notice from a study of *all* of Artist A's portraits, taken together, that the persons he has painted maintain a generally more interesting facial expression than do portraits by Reynolds or Gainsborough, say, that result could be achieved, let us remember, by Artist A's adopting the policy (and many portrait painters have done so) of accepting only such sitters as possessed interesting faces. In which case it would be the sitters who were responsible for the pleasing results, not the artist; and Artist A who had again sunk to the status of the mere craftsman.

And finally (and contrastingly) if Artist A sees nothing in Mrs. X except the truth that she is a dull commonplace woman, not only is that not necessarily a very profound discovery but Artist A is likely to end up with a portrait which must itself acquire some dullness and commonplaceness leaked over from Mrs. X's own nature.

*And if I am making no provision for the possibility of your being acquainted with Mrs. X it's because that possibility is so small as to be negligible. And it's a factor exterior to art, besides.

**I think it should be pointed out here that this loathing of "craftsmanship" is a dogma of present-day criticism which is really as much a fraud as the one about "revealing character in portraiture". The man who achieves *greater heights* of craftsmanship or invents an original and hitherto unknown kind of craftsmanship has contributed as much to art as has the man who excels in "rhythm", "unity", "interpretation of life" or any of the standards which critics chance now to be approving of. Otherwise what would happen to Harnett, and other "trompe l'oeil" painters.



Photo UPI



Photo Fabian Bachrach



Photo UPI

Figure 5, Guessing Contest

As to how close to the truth your individual character-readings, drawn from the above photographs, might come; or how close they would come to your neighbor's readings, from the same photographs, I prefer not to speculate. I will risk the conjecture, however, that in their power to kindle and suggest a wide (and haphazard) range of character-readings the photographs would do as well — and often better — than nine out of ten portraits (including those reproduced here) painted by the world's greatest masters. The photographs are of Queen Louise of Sweden; Harold Ross, former Editor of *The New Yorker*; and Mrs. Anna Sage, the "Woman in Red", of the Dillinger case.

Consequently, if Ingres (as Mr. Canaday charges) has not revealed Madame LeBlanc's character it may be that there wasn't much of it, if any, to reveal; from which it might be concluded that (backhandedly) Ingres had done a swell job in revealing her character — namely, that she didn't have any.

I hope you will pardon my pursuing this subject to such lengths but I wish to make certain that I have demolished — and I think I have — every possible line of reasoning under which this criterion about the revealing of the sitter's personality could possibly be regarded as practicable. There is nothing obscure and mysterious about the problem — nothing which requires more than a bit of careful analysis, and there is no excuse, consequently, for Mr. Canaday (as a teacher) not having made the analysis.

He had an excellent chance here to expose this antique and childish test for the fraud that it is and thus make a substantial contribution to an understanding of art. Instead he succumbs to it himself and thereby helps perpetuate it in men's minds.

In case you need confirmation that this perpetuating is still going on, I quote you from *Time* (issue of August 31st, 1959) as follows:

"He (Epstein) proved himself the greatest portraitist of modern sculpture, immortalized [!] hosts of the great with dashing busts that seemed almost to breathe. Epstein's female portraits were often busts in undress; he proved that breasts also can show personality." [!!!!]

Or again, in a gallery talk at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (July 21st, 1959; subject, *What Is a Portrait?*) the lecturer stated that Sargent once painted a sick man so revealingly that doctors were

able to diagnose from the portrait what was wrong with him, although they had not been able to do so from merely looking at him. I can't explain this one except on the theory that the man was sicker than usual on the day Sargent painted him.

Well, let me just remind you once more that in raising this charge of carelessness (to express it in its mildest form) or of outright misteaching (which is a more accurate description, I believe), I am raising it not in connection with a light, chatty book for the casual reader but with an elaborate work, published by one of the world's greatest art museums, specifically intended to give the public an education in art (See Figure 6) — of which alleged "education" this "testing" of a portrait's

**Figure 6**

The Beginning of an Education in Art!!

Perhaps it's symbolic that the "mother" depicted in the above photograph from the Metropolitan's brochure advertising its *Seminars in Art* is presumably absorbing the very bit of fancy-sounding humbug (about character-revelation) whose basic fraudulence I demonstrate to you in this chapter. Rather sad!

merit according to how much personality-exploring it does, is an important element.

For his next portrait to be discussed, Mr. Canaday very naturally selects one which (in his opinion) supports this alleged "test" of his. I shall demonstrate further on that it doesn't, but for the present let's go along with his argument.

It is Renoir's portrait of Madame Renoir (See Figure 7) and Mr. Canaday regards it as superior to the Ingres because it possesses "deeper meanings beneath the simplicity of its apparent subject."

And in the following paragraphs we are informed as to what these deeper meanings are.

"What makes Renoir a great painter?"

"It is as simple as this: Renoir is a great painter because he had a joyous adoration of life and the ability to translate it into visual terms so that all of us may understand and share it. . . . His art flows from an unwavering conviction of the world's goodness. He sees happiness, in its deepest sense, as the natural state of mankind. He finds it everywhere in the world around him. For Renoir, life is such a miracle that simply to take part in it gives meaning to existence. . . . Renoir's subjects are never unusual. He paints in the conviction that the greatest values in life are, quite naturally, the simplest ones. . . . For Renoir these values are materialized and concentrated in woman—but not woman as a temptress, not even as an individual, and certainly not as a being with psychological quirks and fancies worth exploring. She is none of these things because she is something more; she is the source of all warmth and life in the world. . . . And so . . . the picture has a second and deeper meaning beneath its apparent one. It becomes the image of an earth goddess."

Again let's be candid and describe this material as what it *really* is. It's not education. It's not something to teach you about art. It's just plain space-filler. It's just the verbal acrobatics which any critic, if he wants to succeed in his trade, must be able to turn out on demand, at any hour of the day or night, and in any volume from one to a score of pages.

Mr. Canaday's mind (perhaps after several false starts that didn't pan out) happened fortunately to light on a notion ("*Woman as the Earth Goddess*", etc.) which was simultaneously fancy enough and plausible enough to get by with a public that had already been conditioned to accept (and especially from an institution like the Metropolitan) any magniloquences a critic cares to concoct.

In its way it's all right. It's a cleverer idea (both in its invention and its development) than many other critics could turn out under similar circumstances. But it's *not* *Education*, I repeat; first because it's obviously only a whimsy, deliberately contrived for the occasion; and second because its attachment to this particular picture (rather than any other) is so slight as to be almost non-existent. There are a thousand portraits of women in the world's museums (and a hundred times that number of photographs of pretty girls) from which Mr. Canaday (or another man of his impressionable nature) could have conjured up—if he wanted to—much the same romantic fantasia that he did about Madame Renoir—and with equal justification. Of course, the chances that any other critic—



Figure 7: Madame Renoir, by Renoir

even if it had actually been the portrait of Madame Renoir with which he was engaged at the moment—would come up with even an approximation to Mr. Canaday's particular pipe-dream would be about as infinitesimally small as that three Chicagoans—because all of them happened to be facing East at a certain moment of history—would simultaneously dive off the Brooklyn Bridge exactly twenty years later. Or, if that whimsy (and space-filler) doesn't make my point clear, let me risk a guess that if Mr. Canaday had reached on another day than he did (on a Tuesday instead of a Friday, say) the stage in his writing whereat he had to specify exactly what "deeper meanings" he discerned in the portrait of Madame Renoir, a very different series of ideas might have issued from his mind. The one that he ended up with was much more a fortuity than a compulsion.

There is no excuse for Mr. Canaday's not seeing this. The irrelevance of his remarks should have been obvious to him at a glance even in the role of a critic—and much more so in his present role of a teacher, wherein sober thought and moderation are requisites. And especially is this true since he hasn't the least difficulty in recognizing the same irrelevance in another man, Walter Pater, whose famous lines on the Mona Lisa, Mr. Canaday himself introduces—and then annihilates with a few cutting words.

Here's what Walter Pater wrote:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen days about her, and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the Mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the

sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Mr. Canaday characterizes this — and correctly, of course, — as “notorious literary maundering — which has become the standard example of what criticism is not.”

Excellent!! Let’s agree enthusiastically.

Nevertheless — even if we concede that Pater’s effusion is a bit more recklessly turgid than Mr. Canaday’s — the fact remains that what is wrong with it is exactly the same as what’s wrong with Mr. Canaday’s comment — namely, that there isn’t any *necessary* conjunction between the words and the picture they are supposed to be about.

Pater’s words are simply the expressing of a notion which originated inside his own brain on an occasion when he was delving for something “effective” and “original” to say about a certain work of art — just as were Mr. Canaday’s own words.

The excerpts I quote from Mr. Canaday (“joyous adoration of life . . . woman the source of all warmth and life . . . the image of an earth goddess,” etc.) have a very decided flavor in them of Walter Paterism,* a decided flavor, consequently, of what Mr. Canaday himself has forcefully declared *art criticism is not*.

In making these assertions I am not accusing Mr. Canaday of hypocrisy. He no doubt deeply believes everything he has written.

Nevertheless, if there were a reversal of the generally accepted merit relation between the Madame LeBlanc portrait and the Madame Renoir portrait — that is, if the LeBlanc portrait were regarded as the better of the two, instead of the other way around — I haven’t the slightest doubt that Mr. Canaday, and those of his colleagues who were equally practised, would be capable (and I mean *intellectually* capable, not *ethically* capable) of turning out a dandy article on how much deeper were the meanings Ingres had painted in Madame LeBlanc than those Renoir had painted in Madame Renoir.

To describe Madame Renoir, so far as anything discernible in the portrait is concerned, as a “jolly little lady very much like a million others,” would not seem too unreasonable; and neither would it seem too unreasonable (nor too difficult) to compose two or three snappy paragraphs about the deeper meanings Ingres had revealed in painting Madame LeBlanc . . . , “the inscrutable woman”, “the nineteenth century Mona Lisa”, “the eternal feminine”, etc., etc., etc.

To many persons a sphinx-like visage will evoke as complex and extensive a series of associations as a gay smile — even when painted by Renoir. You may try the experiment yourself, if you wish, with the portrait by Moise Kisling reproduced in Figure 8. Regardless of its apparent inanimation it seems to have a remarkable capacity to stimulate widely-ranging though random (and thus unimportant) trains of thought about the sitter’s personality.

I cite this not as evidence of the merit of Kisling’s



Figure 8: Portrait of a Girl, by Kisling
(Color reproduction on page 142)

achievement (about which you can reach your own opinion) but simply as an observable fact.

* * * * *

Next, let’s return to the seminars and examine what Mr. Canaday has to say about the painting techniques by which Renoir achieved the results (including the “deeper meanings”) which Mr. Canaday says he achieved. I quote Mr. Canaday as follows:

“. . . The picture’s message is universal, expressed in terms of the particular, a recipe for the interpretation of the world which in one variation or another has been effective for more than two thousand years and remains as effective as ever. [Quite a bit of the Pater touch here!!] How does Renoir go about creating this universal symbol? First, by using his subject as it existed in nature only as a point of departure and by modifying it to suggest the eternal quality that woman, for him, represents. [More Pater!] Artists of all periods, when they hunt a meaning beneath the transient surface of things, begin to think in terms of geometric design. The fundamental nature of a symbol is somehow harmonious with the finality of a simple geometrical form. Try now to see the portrait of Madame Renoir not as a picture of a young woman but as a structure of strong solid volumes.

“These volumes, these forms, are much simpler than a literal reproduction of the model’s appearance would have been. As Renoir has drawn them, the face and the crown of the hat describe a solid, regular oval. It is no accident that in the hat brim he repeats his first oval in the opposite direction. And the mass of the figure, if we follow a line along the shoulders and arms, approximates half an oval of the same shape, although it is larger

*An examination of Mr. Canaday’s full text will make the resemblance even more marked.

and slightly irregular. The neck is a cylinder, and this same sturdy form is repeated, although not quite so obviously, in the arms.

"If such an analysis sounds artificial it is because the total effect of a work of art is more than the sum of the technical means used to attain it. The point is that Renoir reduces his subject to large, solid, uncomplicated masses because such forms are suggestive of eternal values.

"The danger Renoir runs in modifying the image in this direction is that it may become ponderous and inert. Hence, he throws the figure slightly off balance (toward our right) as a kind of grace note, to relieve and accentuate the stability of the main forms, he combines the little bouquet of leaves and roses into a more broken silhouette, although he allows it at the same time to echo the oval forms. Finally he gives full freedom to the curling irregularities of the escaping locks of hair. The sharp V's in the lapels and the neckline of the blouse serve as contrast to the dominating rounded forms. The more we study the painting in this way the more we see that everything in this deceptively simple composition is planned and that to change any of it, for instance to make the button larger or smaller, to change its position, or make it one of a row of buttons would put this detail out of its most harmonious relationship to the rest of the picture."

I am forced to admit — regretfully — that this effluence of verbal tomfoolery has a semi-hypnotic effect on many naive and trusting people. It lulls them into a pleasing state of somnolent acquiescence. How wonderful art is, and how wonderfully critics explain it!!

If it were possible for such individuals to reside permanently in the dream-world which the Metropolitan Museum and its spokesman have so ingeniously lured them into, possibly it would be an unkind act to snap them out of it.

It *isn't* possible, however; and the longer they drowse there the more painful is their ultimate departure. So let's immediately make it clear that all this supposedly profound interpretation, far-seeing sagacity and subtle intuition is simply more of the same "arty" humbuggery and space-filling prattle which I have exposed to you before — handed out, it is true, with the confidence, craft, and aplomb of the professional writer but no less objectionable on that account.

Now I'm willing to admit that I have no better way of reading Renoir's mind than you have. But my guess (and I think it's a reasonable one) is that this picture got its start by Renoir's making some such simple remark to his wife as the following:

"Sit down for a while, dear. I'm in the mood to paint your portrait today; give me a nice smile; you look cute."

And then he painted her *as she was*. I think it *was* an accident (regardless of Mr. Canaday's contrary belief) that the hat brim repeated "the first oval in the opposite direction". She just happened to be wearing that kind of hat at the moment. And I think that he painted her hair with "curling

irregularities" because that's approximately how the hair was curling.

On the other hand, I have no actual disproof of your opinion (if you hold it) that Renoir said — either to Madame Renoir or to himself:-

"I want to paint your portrait today, dear, because your hat brim repeats the oval of your head in the opposite direction, because the bouquet of roses and leaves in your hat echoes these oval forms, because the mass of your figure approximates half an oval of the same shape, because the sharp V's in the lapels and neckline of your blouse serve as contrast to the dominating rounded forms and because that one button is exactly the right size in exactly the right place and is not one of a row."

If you agree with Mr. Canaday's version, then nothing remains to be said except that you are built to order for the kind of subscriber the Metropolitan needs for its course in art instruction. You'll love it.

* * * * *

Is there any mode of thought under which all this priggery can be made to possess sense? I don't think so.

Renoir might have painted his wife in any one of a hundred hats or blouses and ended up with a picture about which Mr. Canaday (or anybody else with his gift for words) could have similarly concocted a plausible (to easy marks) explanation of why it was just right that way and shouldn't have been any other way.

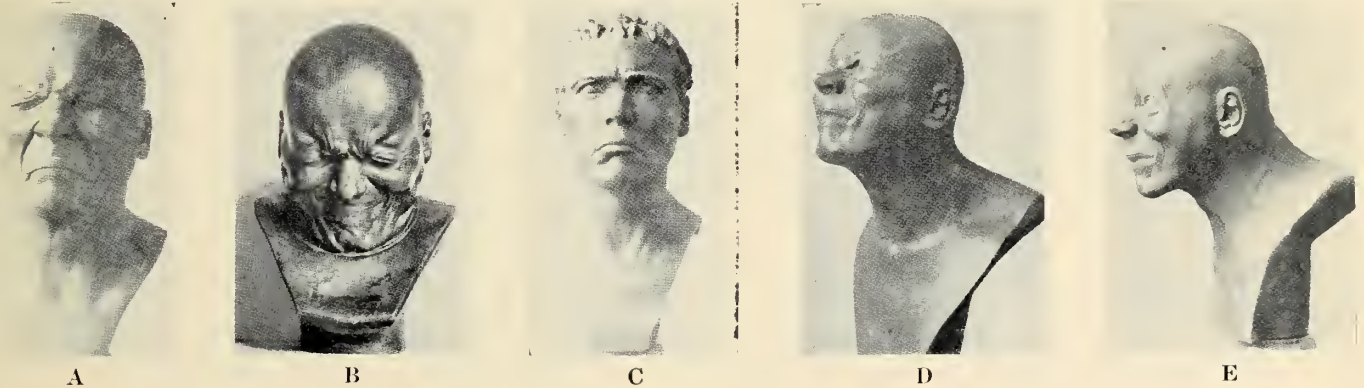
To illustrate, let's compose two imaginary comments about the picture by critics who shared Mr. Canaday's mode of approach but chanced not to be exact duplicates of him.

Critic A: "This is one of Renoir's less effective portraits. It presents to us again his oft-mentioned 'joyous adoration of life', but the concentration of this quality (even if you like it) on the mere head and torso of a young woman without any background to share some of the impact, is more than the sophisticated observer can comfortably absorb. Renoir's well-known obsession for oval forms is also overdone. In the hat crown and face we accept it, and perhaps also in the eyes, but the echoing of the same oval in the hat brim (even in the opposite direction) is distressingly monotonous. The sharp V's in the lapels and neckline of the blouse bring a certain relief, but by that time it is far too late."

Critic B: In this delightful portrait of his wife Renoir has finally proved how wrong are those critics who regard him as having talent rather than genius. Only by his possession of the divine spark could he so unerringly know just the right moment at which the "*echoings*" of a certain shape (such as an oval) should come to an end and a *contrasting* shape (such as V-shaped lapels) should be brought in for replacement. A well-known critic, in discussing this picture, has perceived (cleverly) that a woman's neck is a cylinder, and that this causes the arms (also cylinders) to be an echoing effect. A very keen observation! But he has failed to comment on the continuance of echoing in the four fingers — which is of equal value in demonstrating Renoir's skill. And then — as the supreme achieve-

ment — note how skillfully Renoir has covered the fingers of the right hand. Four more echoings of the cylinder-form would obviously be four too many. How marvelous his instinctive realization of that fact; As I say, he is a genius. There is only one tiny defect to be found; the button of the blouse is manifestly too large and also would be more harmoniously placed about two inches lower."

Now these criticisms, I think, could conceivably (except for the occasional satyric digs I have inserted) be the actual product of actual critics. There is nothing out of character in them. On the contrary, they are exactly in the tone of Mr. Canaday's own comments.



For material such as this (it's merely space-filler, again) to have any value as teaching requires that it possess some universality within itself. There must be some remote possibility that one, three or six individuals out of any hundred would conceivably have reactions of some approximation to Mr. Canaday's reactions. I don't believe any such remote possibility exists.

Let's return now to the allegation I made earlier that the really more important reason why character-revelation was worthless as a test of a portrait's greatness was that such character-revelation was impossible. The chance of any artist's being able to convey to observers any real concept of the personality of the individual he is portraying is so small as to be negligible.

Or, to put the same thought the other way around, I would say that if a certain artist should concentrate his entire effort to giving the subject of his portrait one particular expression (benevolence, arrogance, hate, scorn, resolution, wisdom, take your choice) he would not average one observer in five who agreed (unless given a hint in advance) that he had succeeded in doing so. "Benevolence," if seen at all, would too often be interpreted as "sanctimony," or "shrewdness" or "hypocrisy" — or even as "love," "hate," "tolerance" or "intolerance" — for any greater success than this to be attainable. "Arrogance" would be too often "stupidity" or "selfishness" or "an inferiority complex," or "shyness" or "self-consciousness," or "whimsicality" or "innocence" for the results to be different.

There are too many variations in character and too many different kinds of persons having different "principles" in reading character for any high-

er proportion of agreement than the small amount (one in five) which I have presented as a rough guess.

In which connection I present you a few portrait busts* — each one of which is specifically intended to impart a particular character-revelation — and give you a chance to see for yourself how your interpretations conform with those which the sculptor intended you to have.

No; without supporting "action" (without help from another art — literature or story-telling) character revelation is a nullity in portraiture. Scope can be left for the observer to *exercise his imagination* in making guesses *about* character;

he can even be stimulated to do so; but beyond that there is nothing.

The truth of this allegation will be brought home to you, I believe, if you will study the two faces shown below. Draw such character reading from them as you can, and then compare them with those you draw from the same two faces when the entire painting is shown to you on the next page.



*By the German sculptor, I. X. Messerschmidt, as reported in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art* by Ernest Kris. A is the sinister man; B, a hypocrite and slanderer; C, the melancholic one; D, strong odour; E, a simpleton.



The Fortune Teller by La Tour.



Figure 9, Anne of Cleves, by Holbein.

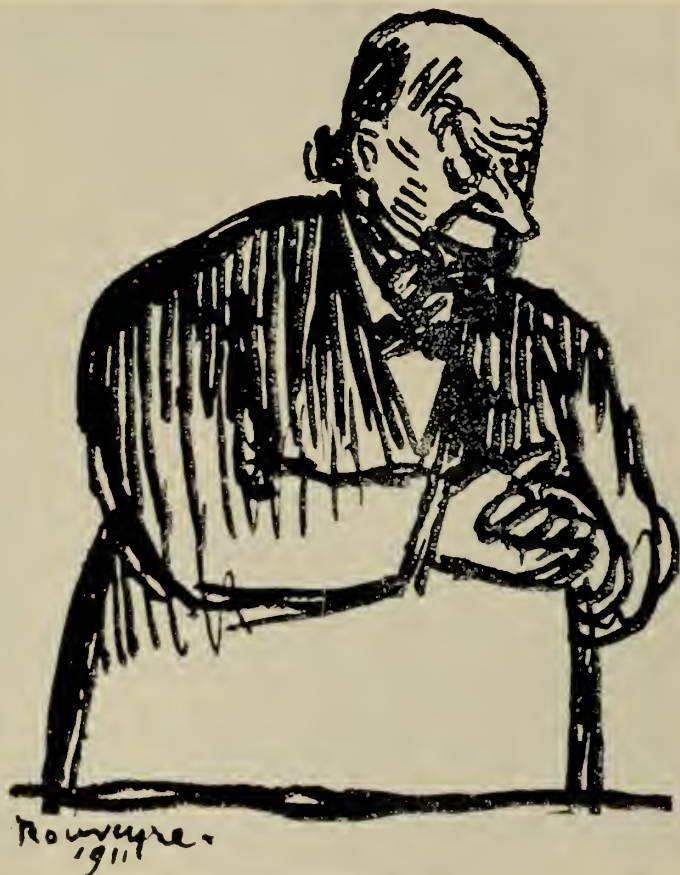


Figure 10, Professor Soury, by Rouveyre.

Of the above two portraits, it is the one of the duchess which will be the subject of a psychological test. I especially call your attention, however, to Mr. Fry's comment (which I have italicized) about the Soury portrait. It's an amazing example, I believe, of a man's ability to sacrifice everything — his rationality, his independence of thought — in order to support a dogma he has committed himself to.

"But certainly one of the most interesting of German caricaturists is M. André Rouveyre, who is not nearly as well known in this country as he deserves to be. I reproduce two of his drawings, "Professor Jules Soury" and the "Duchesse d'Uzès, douairière." It will give you



Figure 11, Duchesse d'Uzès, Douairière, by Rouveyre.

an idea of the spirit in which these drawings are conceived when we know that M. Rouveyre attended Professor Soury's lectures for a whole term in order to arrive at this concentrated expression of the psychological unity of his subject."

One can only hope that M. Rouveyre derived other benefits from his attendance of the lectures; otherwise his time was wasted.

So far in my argument I have merely made assertions — sensible and logical, I believe, but no more.

Let me turn now to the *direct evidence* I have promised.

I shall start with two quotations.

The first is from the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*, by Mr. John Canaday, wherein Mr. Canaday in pursuance of his effort to substantiate the theory that character-revelation is a test of a portrait's greatness, comments as follows about Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves, shown in Figure 9.

"The sweet, prim, guileless and unimagi-native little mask faces us patiently, with a suggestion of gentle obedience. The hands are clasped in a meek and compact little bundle."

The second is taken from the book *Transformations*, by Mr. Roger Fry, who as you will see from his comment accompanying the portrait-sketch shown in Figure 10 . . . is an even more fervid believer in character-revelation than Mr. Canaday. His remarks, which I propose to test, concern the portrait-sketch by Rouveyre, reproduced in Figure 11 . . . and are as follows:

"How instantly we are absorbed in contemplating the kind of character that holds itself in this way, the sublime self-confidence and indifference to opinion of the descendant of a great aristocratic race with all that these conditions of life have engraved on the pale and faded countenance."

These are two very interesting statements, no doubt — if true.

Regrettably, however, they are not true. On the contrary, they are merely extemporaneous and impulsive guesses which their authors — knowing from experience how vulnerable readers are to arty-sounding grandiloquence — felt it would be safe for them to indulge in under the circumstances.

Neither of these portraits imparts even approximately the emotional responses which the critics seem to regard as inevitable — as I have demonstrated to my own satisfaction (and I hope I can to yours) through certain psychological quiz-tests which I conducted among college students.

Inasmuch as I analyze psychological tests of this sort more elaborately in Chapter VI, I shall, for the moment, merely report how the students "voted" in expressing the "character-revelation" which they themselves read or deduced out of the two portraits — and let you draw your own conclusions therefrom. In both cases the character-



Figure 13A

In anticipation of a point to be brought out later, please examine this individual's eyes and draw what conclusions you can as to his or her character.

revelation declared by the critic to be the correct one, is the one italicized.

Here is the tabulation for the Holbein portrait.

Character Revelations submitted to vote	Number of votes for each	Percentages
Determined and confident	31	23%
<i>Sweet, prim and gently obedient</i>	24	19%
Sharp and sarcastic	10	7%
Reserved, acute, subtle	36	28%
Impatient and bossy	8	6%
Trusting and affectionate	4	3%
Shrewd and suspicious	11	8%
Weak and indecisive	8	6%
	132	100

Extra Test

Hands are in a meek compact bundle	74
Hands are in a resolute compact bundle	65

For the Rouveyre portrait the tabulation was as follows:

Character Revelations submitted to vote	Number of votes for each	Percentages
Wealthy woman who served three months in jail rather than pay what she consid- ered an unfair tax charge	25	26%
Woman of peasant origin who became morganatic wife of an emperor, fol- lowed him into exile after World War I and support- ed him by writing spicy memoirs of his reign	9	9%
Resentful woman who, when her sister married a very wealthy man and refused to contribute to her support, picketed her sister's resi- dence wearing her shabbiest clothes	13	13%
Night-club owner whose two hobbies were breeding race- horses and solving cross- word puzzles	8	8%
<i>Woman of royal birth dis- playing the self-confidence and indifference to opinion of the descendant of a great aristocratic race</i>	19	20%
A former moving picture star now living in poverty	21	21%
A former moving picture star now living comfortably on her savings	3	3%
	98	100

As you will see, the character-revelations favored by the critics fared not too well in these tests. In

neither case did they win highest preference and in neither case did they even gain as much as a one-in-five choice. In fact, there was better support for "character-revelations" almost opposite to the critics' favorites than for those which accorded to them.

However, do not misunderstand me. That the critic's "guesses" proved decidedly wrong this time, though important, is not nearly so important as the fact that they were nothing else *except* guesses, and that although some guesses might have greater chances of achieving a better percentage of conformity than others, that better percentage of conformity could never be enough for the establishing of a principle upon it.

Now in case you are wondering how dependable tests such as these really are, let me set your mind at rest by stating firmly that the tests are so completely dependable that they are really superfluous. You really don't need them at all.

I think I can best explain what I mean by asking you to glance again at the two portraits and at the assortment of "character-revelations" which I have submitted as "possibilities" and then ask yourself — hanging tightly to what bits of knowledge you have picked up about men in your travel through life — whether you would not immediately have known in advance (and without waiting for the tests actually to be taken) that the tests would come out approximately as non-committally as they did; and that there would not be enough conformity of preference for any one character-revelation for you to justify accepting that preference as the eternally "correct" one.

From which it follows, I think, that you have always been aware (even if only subconsciously)

that this chatter about character-revelation in portraits (built up with blarney about what could be read from "thin lips", from "hard", "small", "cold" or "mean" eyes, from eyes that were "too close together" from "firm chins", "weak mouths", etc., etc.) was ninety-eight per cent nonsense. Your tending to take it seriously (if you did so tend) was the result merely of your attention being turned elsewhere and of your assuming that there must be at least some solid ground for any notion which was apparently so widely accepted.

I hope this "second-look" into your own psychology works out in the way I have predicted, and that you are willing, therefore, to accept the quiz-tests as dependable. But if you still have doubts I can only suggest that you make similar tests of your own. I don't think they will vary enough from mine to change the verdict.

Now in case you are wondering why I have placed so much emphasis on this fakery of character-revelation (which is at least a cute little idea, you might think) I have two reasons for doing so.

First, that its fakery (though evil enough in itself) does not represent the complete evil of it. Much worse, to my way of thinking, is the almost unbelievable irresponsibility, carelessness and hypocrisy which it exposes in those critics who make use of it — the obvious failure, on their part, to verify what they say and their assumption that your gullibility makes any such verification unnecessary.

Second, that it is an excellent introduction to similar fakeries which I shall call to your attention in succeeding pages and an incentive for you, besides, not to be so easily taken in hereafter.

Things That Never Should Have Been Said

If you need further evidence as to how big a mess critics can get themselves into as they start to talk about portrait painting, let me call your attention to the following remarks by Mr. John Canaday, in the Metropolitan Museum's Seminars in Art, about the portrait of the Duke of Urbino shown in Figure 12.

... "one of the extraordinary portraits of any time, a supreme example of the revelation of personality in spite of seemingly insuperable difficulties. A jousting accident had cost the duke his right eye and broken the nose in a face already swarthy and far from ideally beautiful. But Piero took the ruined profile, the coarse hair, even the warts on the face, and patterned them into a design revealing the strength, decision, intelligence and abstract beauty — for, as drawn by Piero, the line of the duke's profile has become abstractly beautiful — of one of the most compelling personalities of the age. . . . A landscape can enhance the mood of a picture; the role of the serene background behind Federigo (the duke) becomes clear if we imagine his profile played against a stormy scene; our previous impression of the great clarity and decision of his intellect would be much changed."

There are some extremely rash statements there, as you can see — but because they come from the Metropolitan

Museum you are, of course, expected to gulp them down without a whimper. However, since I have already exposed Character Revelation as a principle, I won't waste time objecting to Mr. Canaday's describing this portrait as being a "supreme example" of it, more than to say that it's ridiculous.

But that isn't all. Let's next consider Mr. Canaday's theory about what a background does to character interpretation.

It doesn't necessarily do a thing. Put the duke in a stormy scene and the "great clarity of his intellect" might be all the more evident as the result of his being able to maintain it under such circumstances.

A stormy background cannot be tied down to any specific effect on a man posed in front of it. In this case it's just a question of which way the critic feels like making it work on that occasion. He's so sure that his readers are too moronic to know the difference that a pause to cogitate would be time wasted.

And finally, Mr. Canaday's assertion that the line of the duke's profile is "abstractly beautiful" is clearly another irresponsible whimsy — as absurd as the other two; thus producing three absurdities in one short paragraph, which isn't a bad record, even for the seminars. For more about this profile, see Appendix A.



Figure 12, Duke of Urbino, by Piero della Francesca.



Figure 13, Portrait of Henry the Eighth, Holbein.

"The picture smoothly reveals the great and terrible monarch in all his bejewelled, beplumed splendor. But Holbein at his most flattering could not help penetrating to a man's character: he has given Henry a killer's coldly reflective eyes." *Time*, May 4th, 1959.

The usual bromide! If this had been a portrait of Louis the Saint, of France, the critic would probably have "read" the eyes very differently. Compare with your reaction to the eyes in Figure 13A.



There isn't a half ounce of character revelation in these three Rembrandts combined. You can dream "interpretations" into them, yes, just as you can into the photographic portraits shown on page 11, but it doesn't mean a thing unless a majority of people end up (and they won't, as you can prove by a trial) with approximately the same interpretation that you did.

Rembrandt Isn't Half as Great as You Think

Before your resentment of the above headline boils over, let me point out that it affects your estimate of Rembrandt's "greatness" only to the extent that you share the popular view of what gives him that greatness. If, for example, you agree with the remarks under Figure 14 about his being the greatest revealer of character in the history of portraiture, and if you think that this ability of his is an important factor in his stature, then you must reduce your estimate by whatever degree of force you assigned to that factor. If it had, in your opinion, a fifty per cent force in your judgment of his work, then you must resign yourself hereafter to admiring him only half as much as previously — the reason being, of course, that he possesses only the same power to reveal character as do all other painters; namely, none at all.

When I quoted you, a while ago, Mr. Canaday's censure of Pater's "blurb" about the Mona Lisa, I also quoted some of Mr. Canaday's own remarks which seemed to possess very much the same flavor. This tendency of his to "Faterism" is even more striking, I think, in his comment about the Rembrandt shown in Figure 15 as follows:

"It could be regarded by a certain standard as a genre subject, showing an ordinary human being engaged in an insignificant bit of a day's activities. By this standard it would still be enjoyable as a technical

masterpiece, but it would hardly warrant its large size and dramatic presentation; it would be a waste of the time and skill of a superb painter. Its greatness lies beyond the technique or subject. The fall of golden light reveals an inconsequential old woman about whom we know nothing except what we may surmise from her dress and physical characteristics. But we need know only that we are in the presence of a spiritual wholeness that gives meaning to life because it reduces to unimportance the suffering and decay of the body. If we had seen this woman at some important moment, posed self-consciously in her best clothes, the implications of the picture would be limited by the restricting specialness of the circumstances. Climatic moments are important as landmarks; they may bring forth vividly special aspects of our natures. But our lives from day to day are filled with a thousand unspectacular actions; by choosing one of them Rembrandt brings us nearer to the old woman. Instead of showing us one event in a life, he shows us something closer to life itself."

No matter how profound, subtle, or sensitive it may seem to you, the fact remains that it is approximately a hundred per cent out of Mr. Canaday and zero per cent out of Rembrandt. The old lady might have been paring her nails in the character Mr. Canaday depicts, or she might have been paring them while watching the blade of the guillotine drop on Marie Antoinette's neck.

As to which interpretation, (if correct) would better give a "meaning to life" is mostly a matter of your humor at the moment — whether benevolent or cynical.



Figure 14, Portrait of a Young Man, by Rembrandt.

Arts Magazine (issue of February, 1957) calls this "a striking example of the most penetrating and persuasive revealer of character in the history of portraiture." Which, of course, is merely a riding along with tradition. But don't be misled. The young chap — so far as Rembrandt is concerned — could be a million chaps. He could be open and sincere or shrewd and deceitful; he could be genial and extravagant or cold and penny-pinching. He could be brave, witty, insane, arrogant, obstinate, faithful, stupid, selfish — anything your imagination can conceive and it wouldn't be necessary to make even the smallest change in his features. And the same remarks are applicable to any other of Rembrandt's portraits shown herewith.



Figure 15, Old Woman Paring Her Nails, Rembrandt.



Figure 16, *Man With the Golden Helmet*, by Rembrandt.

In his book, *Art and Civilization*, Mr. Bernard S. Myers discusses this portrait as follows:

"Rembrandt's ability to evoke spiritual contemplation, to fathom the depths of the soul and its identification with the universe is felt in such a work as the celebrated *MAN WITH THE GOLDEN HELMET* (Figure 16). Here an elderly man is posed in steel cuirass and golden helmet. . . . This is no mere portrait; it is an allegory of despair and inherent tragedy. The hard-bitten, disillusioned professional soldier seems weighed down."

The passage I have italicized is just a little more of the pompous rant which critics dutifully push in every little while to register themselves as "loyal members of the team."

Actually, this interpretation does not derive from anything Rembrandt did. It derives first from Mr. Myers' assumption that the man was a professional soldier, and then from his assumption that professional soldiers are necessarily hard-bitten and disillusioned. Take away these two assumptions and the fellow could just as easily be a jolly old chap dressed up for a masquerade ball, and trying to act the part.

The only significance which the term "character revelation" can have in portrait painting is if you make it mean a "complexly painted face". Regarded in this light it acquires the same significance as any other complexly paint-

ed element in the picture — such as a complexly painted torso, hand or bit of furniture — namely that of providing you some interesting things to take notice of.

If (as I hope) you are now asking yourself how it is humanly conceivable that members of a supposedly legitimate profession (art criticism) are still employing this old fakery (character revelation) and if you are also asking yourself (even more amazingly) how a great institution like the Metropolitan can be guilty of the same malpractice while simultaneously putting on a big show of how eager it is to educate everybody, the answer is that they need it in their business. It's one of the main props in their doctrine of immortalism and they don't know how to get rid of it without a simultaneous collapse of almost everything else.

Okay, let's feel sorry for them and hope they can find some way out, short of going through the humiliation of a "Scopes Trial."

Nevertheless, for ourselves as individuals, the sensible policy is not to wait for them to escape but depart on our own initiative. And a primary resolution to adopt in doing so is to be extremely suspicious, hereafter, of everything they say, on any subject. The extracts from their writings which I have quoted you here and on preceding pages are so obviously senseless that a pause of thirty seconds (provided you make it) will take care of you well enough; but more time than that will frequently be required to expose the swindle; so double-check everything, no matter how innocent it seems.

Bear in mind the famous bit of dialogue by which Shakespeare reveals the decrepitude of a gullible old dotard:

Hamlet Do you see yonder cloud, that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius By the mass, and 'tis like a camel, indeed.

Ham. Methinks it is like a weasel.

Pol. It is backed like a weasel.

Ham. Or, like a whale?

Pol. Very like a whale.

Don't be anybody's Polonius.

And if you hesitate to take this antagonistic attitude towards such distinguished men remind yourself how often the most distinguished of them can make a momentary slip.

For example, take note of the following quotation from Albert Einstein, in *Living Philosophies*:

"To make a goal of comfort or happiness has never appealed to me; a system of ethics built on this basis would be sufficient only for a herd of cattle."

Of course what this means — whether Einstein saw it or not — was that he was unable to be comfortable being comfortable, or that the only way he could be happy was by being unhappy.

What Can Give You Your Biggest Laugh at Critics

It's to see them excoriating an artist for catering to the public's ignorance and then see them conducting their own profession in a manner which would be impossible but for that ignorance.

People In Love With Their Own Emotions

Fervors and exuberances, such as those I quote you below, though sometimes interesting to the student of psychology, have only a negligible significance in art criticism. They can be useful *occasionally* — as can a friend's remark that he enjoyed a certain moving picture at the local cinema and thinks you will enjoy it too — but as a basis for permanent evaluations they are worthless; first because they are extremely (and no doubt regrettably) transient and second because they can be inhibited *in advance* by subjecting the prospective beneficiary to the appropriate regimen of emotions. Why critics try to pretend otherwise is not nearly so easy to explain as why a moth flies into the flame.

"That is to me poetry so moving that I can hardly keep my voice steady in reading it." A. E. Housman, of the following words from *Book of Common Prayer*: "but no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement with God for him."

"Pleasure, even when dressed up with the name of aesthetic pleasure, has no connection with a sublime work which overwhelms us, which makes us shudder, or which moves us to the verge of tears. Whoever says he reads the *Prometheus Bound* 'with delight' or that he listens 'with pleasure' to the *Ninth Symphony*, classes himself at once with the insensitive. What has pleasure to do with the bitter shivering interest aroused and ceaselessly renewed [??] by Ravel's *Concerto for the Left Hand*? or with the shock and almost haggard staring caused by Picasso's *Girl on the Seashore*?" Etienne Souriau, *Scientific Study of Aesthetic Appreciation* (translated by Van Meter Ames), in *Journal of Aesthetics*, September, 1955.

Comments like these are fine for an autobiography (and even better for the sixteen-year-old girl's diary, see cartoon) but they are of very doubtful importance in art criticism.

"Virgilia, Coriolanus' wife, though she is present throughout the whole of four scenes, speaks barely a hundred words. But a sudden, direct light is cast upon her by a phrase which takes our breaths with beauty, when Coriolanus welcomes her on his triumphant return from Corioli as 'My gracious silence!' Magical words! They give a miraculous substance to our fleeting, fading glimpses of a lovely vision which seems to tremble away from the clash of arms and pride that reverberates through the play. Behind the haughty warrior and his Amazonian mother, behind the vehement speech of this double Lucifer, the exquisite, timid spirit of Virgilia shrinks out of sight into the haven of her quiet home. One can almost hear the faint click of the door behind her as it shuts her from the noise of brawling tongues. Yet in her presence and in the memory of her presence, Coriolanus becomes another and a different being. It is true we may listen in vain for other words so tender as 'My gracious silence!' from his lips. A man who has one love alone finds only one such phrase in a lifetime." Middleton Murry, in *A Neglected Heroine of Shakespeare*.

"But this latter work (Brahms' *Song of Destiny*) touches heights of a mysterious beauty that is less that of the senses than a mystical awareness of eternity. There is no 'theatre' in it, no drama, no outcries of anguish or hope, sorrow or joy. There is an unearthly serenity like destiny that is unchanging, and time that



"Ate baba au rhum for first time tonight."

Drawing by Steig
©1959, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

is eternal, while it flashes by." Olin Downes, in *New York Times*, March 14, 1952.

"When rapture is lacking, poetry becomes poor and commonplace." Louis W. Flaccus, *The Spirit and Substance of Art*.

"If I read a book and it makes my body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there *any other way*?" Emily Dickinson.

Incidentally, here is another supposed "test" of poetry which shares the same fervent impracticality as Emily Dickinson's. Under Mr. Osborne's test, about ninety-nine per cent of the world's poetry would be bad *immediately*, and under Emily Dickinson's test all poetry would be bad four days out of five.

"The man who asks what a poem means is asking a ridiculous question, for unless the poem is a bad one, the poet himself cannot say what he meant except in precisely the words of the poem." Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Criticism*.

Chapter III

No One-Best-Way in Art

The hypocrisy which I am going to complain about in this chapter is the one about the "sacredness" of art — the pretence, namely, that the world's "great masterpieces" are "perfection" and that making the slightest change in them — besides being sacrilege — would destroy their beauty.

Whether this hypocrisy is any worse than the ones (about "immortalism" and character-revelation) which I tried to demolish in my two previous chapters I prefer not to say; but it is much more frequently used — both by critics and by the general public which trots meekly along in the critics' trails.

In its most extreme form it manifests itself in the hurling of frenzied maledictions and scoldings against any poor chap (or "heretic") who jizzes up Beethoven or burlesques El Greco and so on.

Here's one, for example — from Hector Berlioz's, *Autobiography* — which I quote somewhat regretfully, because I imagine that despite the "wrongness" of Berlioz's conduct you may feel a certain sympathy for him in the courage of his wrongness.

For instance, I noticed one day in *Iphigenia in Tauris* cymbals had been added to the Scythian Dance, whereas Gluck had only employed strings, and in the Orestes recitative the trombones, that came in so perfectly appropriately, were left out altogether. I decided that if these barbarisms were repeated I would let them know it and I lay in wait for my cymbals.

They appeared.

I waited, although boiling over with rage, until the end of the movement, then in the moment's silence that followed I yelled:

"Who dares play tricks with Gluck and put cymbals where there are none?"

The murmuring around may be imagined. The public, not being particularly critical, could not conceive why that young idiot in the pit should get so excited over so little. But it was worse when the absence of the trombones made itself evident in the recitative. Again that fatal voice was heard:

"Where are those trombones? This is simply outrageous!"

I afterwards heard that the unlucky trombones were only obeying orders. . . . After that night the proper readings were restored.

The incident occurred in Berlioz's youth — as you have no doubt surmised — so we may more

easily excuse him for having been taken in by a flossy-sounding cant which he imagined to be expressive of a "love for beauty." However, that does not reduce the magnitude of his error.

As an indication of how abjectly most people are trapped in this pernicious doctrine of one-best-wayism let me present you the following paragraph from *Time*, issue of April 13th, 1962.

"Who's boss in a concerto — the conductor or the soloist?" rhetorically demanded the New York Philharmonic's Maestro **Leonard Bernstein**, 43, in his latest outburst of podium pedagogy. Answer: "Sometimes one, sometimes the other, but almost always the two manage to get together" — except in the case that prompted Lenny's musings: the latest Philharmonic appearance of intractable but talented Pianist **Glenn Gould**, 29. After explaining to the 2,800 in the audience that he disapproved of Gould's interpretation of Brahms's *D Minor* but would defend to the death an artist's right to experiment, Lenny democratically beckoned the intense Canadian to the stage. Gould — who considers his pinkies too precious for any more effusive greeting — gratefully touched Bernstein's fingertips and launched into his very special, barely audible and snail-like reading of the work. Snorted one New York critic: "All the whole thing proved is that Gould is not a good Brahms player, and that we might have discovered for ourselves."

Mr. Gould can perhaps be more easily forgiven for his part in this episode than can the others. He has at least escaped from the particular one-best-wayism which, at the moment, was apparently prevailing among music's cognoscenti. And if his escape has been merely into another one-best-wayism — invented by himself — some special privileges should be allowed to him as the performing artist; and allowed as well to his youth in the hope that he will mellow with the years.

Mr. Bernstein and the "New York critic" are different. They seem to be permanently "ossified" within their respective recipes for the correct rendition of Brahms' *D Minor*.

And it is also manifest, I think, that the general public are similarly unfortunate victims. Otherwise it would be hardly necessary for Mr. Bernstein (seemingly in fear of a riot breaking out) to give his audience an advance notice of his disapproval of Mr. Gould's interpretation.

Let me make it clear, however, that one-best-wayism, masquerading under the name of "good taste", besides having been the basic cause for the persecution of artists since art began, is still in operation, and as determined as ever (despite pretences of having reformed) to go on making trouble in the same old way for everybody it can.

Of the many expedients it uses one of the most obnoxious is "adjective-cheating" — a trick to make you believe in the capacity of a single "telling" adjective either to condemn or sanctify an art work — as though that adjective — assuming it was correctly applied — delivered a permanent and incontrovertible verdict of "good" or "bad."

A glance at the subsidiary material, *Tyranny of the Adjective* on pages 25-26 will show you how easy it is to go wrong that way and where you end up if you get the habit.

I am compelled to report (as you probably have anticipated I would) that the Metropolitan Museum, in its *Seminars in Art*, not only is an arch offender in thus slinging these allegedly all-powerful adjectives about but does its best to draw you into the same evil practice.

In a moment I shall try to pin the turpitude firmly on the Museum's chest. My method will be to take three paintings in connection with which the Museum specifically warns you as to how terrible making any changes in them would be, then proceed to make a variety of exactly such changes, and demonstrate, if I can, that nothing very harmful has happened to the paintings, despite the Museum's predictions contrariwise.

But first let me say that the time has come, I fear, when you must make a disagreeable and fateful choice between two modes of thought — or philosophies. If you are to get anywhere at all in your understanding of art you must decide whether or not to believe (or "fall for") the generally accepted (by implication*, that is) theory that an art work exists (or could exist) which is impregnable to fatigue — that an art work exists which

*Since obviously all verdicts of lasting "beauty" or of the "betterness" of one art work over another are based on a denial of Fatigue.

you could continue to enjoy forever, no matter how intensely and persistently you were subjected to the perception of it; or whether you prefer to believe, oppositely, that such impregnability is impossible.

If you are determined to adhere to the first and much more popular view, then I must confront you with another choice between alternatives — either to discard this book at once or else grit your teeth and take a tight hold on your hat (and temper) while I direct all my efforts, from here on, to prove how wrong you are.

On the other hand, if you incline towards my less popular view and are extremely skeptical as to any such miraculous impregnability, then there is a good chance, I think, that you can coast along very comfortably through the succeeding pages and have a look at various aspects of art which had not previously caught your eye.

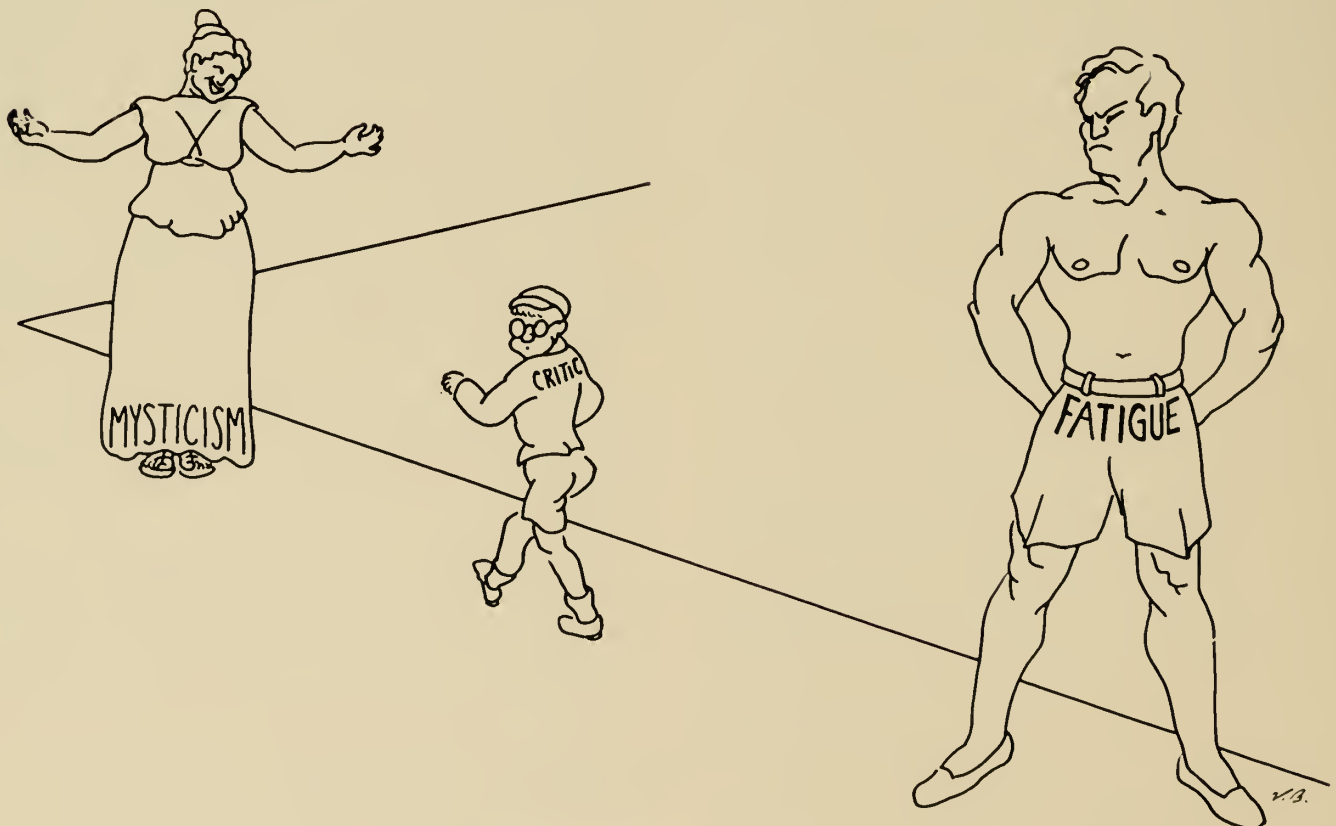
It's an issue you really can't straddle, much as you might prefer to do so.

* * * * *

And now to remind you (though perhaps there is no need to do so) how obstinately, ferociously, desperately, irrationally — even insanely — critics oppose everything I have said here.

No matter where you wander in the realm of art criticism, the ability of the critics who live there *not to see Fatigue* is one of the most astounding exhibitions of pig-headed self-delusion you will ever find. Fatigue can be stepping on their toes, sitting

(Continued on page 27)



Escape into Schizophrenia

"You're imagining things, dear. There's nobody there. Come to Mommy."

Tyranny of the Adjective

The easiest and most effective way for a critic to prevent your finding out that fatigue has anything to do with art — and thus get you tied neatly to his apron strings — is by a manipulation of descriptive terms.

If, for example, he can make you think that by describing an art work as “artificial”, he has thereby proved that it is at least defective if not totally N.G.; or if, from the opposite angle, he can make you think that by describing it as “monumental” he has proved that you’d better get ready to love it; then he has taken a dangerous (for you) first step in making you his aesthetic slave.

You have, of course, been conditioned in advance for being thus taken in by the casual talk of your acquaintances — by Clara’s telling you that she likes a house because it looks “lived-in”, or by Harry’s telling you he dislikes a chair because it’s “so hard to get up out of.”

As a starting point for light conversation the practice slides by well enough, but as a foundation for a definite verdict it’s about as solid as an ice-cream cone — and especially so in art.

To dispraise an art work for being “artificial” or to praise it for being “monumental” — even assuming the adjectives to be correctly applied — doesn’t get you anywhere at all. Plenty of artificial procedures (such as giving a fancy clip to your poodle) can hold their attraction for quite some time and plenty of monumental acts (such as flag-pole sitting) can become monumentally silly with great speed.

But that is not all. Actually, it is almost impossible to pin such descriptive terms on any art work and know that they really belong there, the reason being that every quality in art has two faces, so to speak, and is simultaneously “bad” and “good”, a la Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

In illustration of my point I show you two lists of adjectives. List A consists of supposedly commendatory adjectives — accompanied by my “translation” of them — without losing the basic quality — into just their opposites — namely, condemnatory adjectives.

List B is a reversal of the process — from condemnatory to commendatory.

List A

<i>Good</i>	<i>Bad</i>
Integrated	Mechanical
Rhythmic	Jerky or Pounding
Lucid	Obvious
Disciplined	Finicking
Edifying	Pedantic
True	Trite
Delicate	Insipid
Monumental	Pompous
Original	Outlandish

List B

<i>Bad</i>	<i>Good</i>
Overworked	Painstakingly developed
Slick (or neat)	Well organized
Flat	Giottoesque
Inappropriate	Startling
Contrived	Planned
Theatrical	Brilliant
Cute	Fanciful
Sentimental	Deeply felt
Jumbled	Variegated

And if this seems to you as merely a rather trivial “stunt”, I am quite willing to admit that it would be — except that it helps me to expose an extremely common critical malpractice.

The way critics work it is very simple and very easy.

Having first decided — for reasons of their own — whether they are for or against an art work, they then give “force” to their decision by describing it only with the type of adjectives (“good” ones, or “bad” ones) which conform to that decision.

For instance, consider the “adjudication” by Mr. John Canaday of a painting by Thomas Benton, reproduced in Figure 17.

“The artificiality of his style seems out of key with the folksiness of his subjects, leaving us with the feeling that although he wanted to get to the heart of his material, he managed only to observe it from the outside and record it inappropriately.” John Canaday in *Seminars in Art*.

Let me state firmly that it really doesn’t tell you a thing about the painting except that Mr. Canaday has decided to



Figure 17, Boom Town, Benton.

disapprove of it. “Artificiality of style” and “record it inappropriately” are simply phrases he dug up to throw you off the scent.

Take a glance at Seurat’s *La Grande Jatte*, a page or two ahead. What could be more “artificial” than Seurat’s “pointillism”, or “folksier” than Seurat’s subject! But Mr. Canaday makes no claim of the subject being recorded “inappropriately.”

If there’s one word that most aptly describes critics when they talk about inexhaustible and immortal art works it is *juvenile*.

Even a chair to sit in or a bed to sleep in are not eternally good. You like to have them available, but not tied to you with a rope.



Figure 18, Raphael



Figure 19, Ingres

"If the reader compares Ingres' *Apotheosis of Homer*, for example, with Raphael's *School of Athens*, he should be able to see even in the reproduction how the Ingres is flat, pasty, insipid, artificially staged, dully composed and almost offensive in quality. It contains elements borrowed without necessity and composed without creativity. Raphael's picture is solid, monumental, alertly intelligent, breathtakingly alive, and superbly inventive." John P. Sedgwick, Jr., *Art Appreciation Made Simple*.

A perhaps even more extreme effort to force the critic's own evaluation on his reader, through the fervor of his descriptive terms, is demonstrated by the remarks about two paintings by Raphael and Ingres shown in Figures 18 and 19.

Exactly what is the eternally correct degree of superiority of one painting to the other I shall not guess. But I would doubt if the gap between them is either as vast or as permanent as Mr. Sedgwick seems to believe.

I fear that both these critics have been infected with the same cynical (but at least candid) disregard for truth which was expressed by George Jean Nathan when, in his book, *Testament of a Critic*, he said: "Criticism is used to speaking in a voice of finality, for only by speaking so may it attract the attention that is necessary to its very life."

That the adjective-based devaluations, which critics issue so voluminously, emanate from the phraseology rather than from the pictures themselves is also proved, I think, by how easy it is to transform the pictures' supposed "faults", into merits, by a rather simple revision of the wording. Here are two cases.

"July Hay [a painting by Thomas Benton] is . . . airless and spaceless, bulging like a bas-relief — faults which derive directly from a peculiar and laborious technique of Benton's own invention." Alexander Eliot, in *Three Hundred Years of American Painting*.

"His [Peter Blume's] two oils regrettably are overworked — they're brittle in form, almost chromo in color and heavy-banded in their symbolism". Emily Genauer, in *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, March 2, 1952.

We "translate" them thus. . .

"July Hay's remarkable capacity to convey a sense of reality — as if the shapes in it were actually bulging as in a bas-relief — results from its airless and even spaceless transparency — a benefit which derives direct-

ly from a peculiar and laborious technique of Benton's own invention."

And thus . . .

"Peter Blume's two oils beautifully illustrate the old saying that *genius is the capacity for taking infinite pains*. The workmanship is stunning in the vastness of it. The forms are crisp, the colors daringly brilliant and the symbolism striking."

Never forget that there are men around who derive financial benefits from keeping other men ignorant about art.

Interviews that almost clear up everything

"Ted Hexman, as a leading jazz authority, who would you say is the greatest living trumpet player?"

"No question about it — Froglips Jenkins."

"Why is that?"

"Because Frog-lips has it. You either have it or you don't. It's as simple as that."

"Uh-huh. What does Frog-lips have?"

"Look — either you feel it or you don't. It's as simple as that."

"But what I'd like to have you tell me is —"

"Let's put it this way. Frog-lips has something to say. To be great in this business, you've got to have something to say."

"Good! Now just what is it that Frog-lips has to say?"

"Listen, square, when you listen to Frog-lips you know what he's got to say. It's as —"

"Simple as that, eh? Well, thank you, Ted Hexman, for putting this whole thing in a way I'd never even considered before."

Parke Cummings

(Continued from page 24)

in their laps or beating their heads with a club and still they can't observe him anywhere.

I don't know when it first started; but it was going strong in the fifteenth century when Leonardo da Vinci said:

"Never set the heads of your figures straight above the shoulders, but turn them sideways to the left or right."

And still going strong in the early eighteenth century when Anton Mengs said:

"Never let two limbs — two arms or two legs — of the same figure appear in an identical foreshortening. Let no limb be repeated and if you show the outer side of the right hand you must show the inner side of the left."

It's plain as day, isn't it, what the real purpose here is. It's to avoid monotony and thereby hold down the speed of tiring.

And how simple and natural it would have been for Messrs. da Vinci and Mengs to preface their remarks by saying: "Be careful not to do things that tire too fast — as for example the following . . ." and *then* issue their warnings about painting heads, limbs and hands. But no, that lets the skeleton out of the closet.

And the same panicky evasion, the same refusal to face reality prevails today.

A well known correspondence school warns its students against placing an object or spot in the exact centre of a composition (as shown in figure A) "because the equal space division around the spot soon becomes monotonous." And it then proceeds to recommend the placement shown in figure B on the ground that "this position is satisfying to the eye."

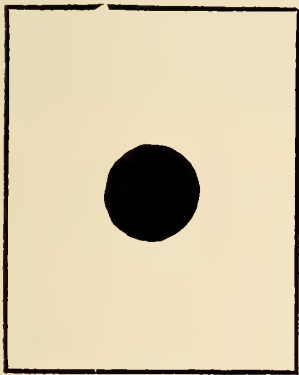


Figure A

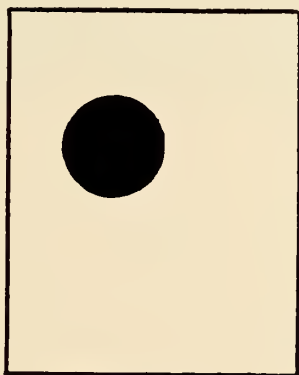


Figure B

Which is being more honest (slightly) than Mengs and da Vinci — because in using the word "monotonous" it at least gives you a peek through the keyhole at Fatigue.

But the hypocrisy is still there — accomplished by "changing the subject", so to speak, from "monotony" to "satisfying the eye", and thus leading the student to think that "monotony" (or Fatigue) has been successfully given the gate and needn't be bothered about any longer.

But it isn't so. You don't get rid of monotony by changing a spot's placement. All you can do is give yourself a wider variety of placements to choose from, and thus improve your *chances* of reducing the monotony. Fatigue is still on hand, nevertheless, (and always will be) trying to thwart every device you think up. You *stare off* Fatigue as long as you can; you never *defeat* it.

Similarly almost all authorities on composition will warn you against *tangents*.

An arrangement such as C is "wrong", whereas an arrangement such as D is "right." And again it's never on account of tiring. It's more "artistic" that way, or more "harmonious", or "less artificial."

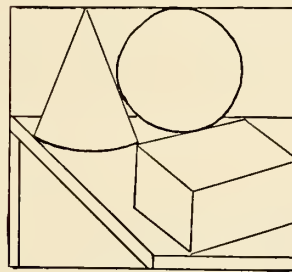


Figure C

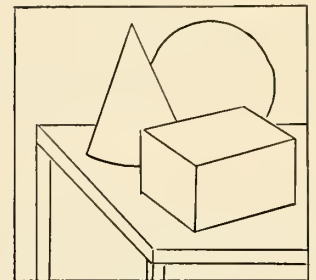


Figure D

Yet the barest analysis will tell you that the real objection to tangents is as before — rapid tiring. Tangents cause you to believe (and very naturally) that they are not there by accident but have been employed for some logical reason. Whereupon you search for that reason, and when it can't be found you resent having been put to that much wasted effort. Or, to express it differently, tangents possess what I call an "unrewarding obtrusiveness." They tire you fast, and for nothing.

And so it goes for all the other procedures that are "bad composition": "unbalances", "ambiguities", "excessive busy-ness", "style-changes in the same picture" (that's a horrible one), "subject-dominance" etc., etc. They number in the hundreds, but no matter how subtle and involved they may be, if you look into them carefully, you will find that the basic reason for calling them "wrong" is in every case the same — namely that they have a high rate of tiring.

But what does that high rate of tiring really amount to? It's a warning; a danger signal, no more. It doesn't justify a forbidding, a prohibition, no matter how much critics, teachers and other authorities tell you it does.

There's a difference between "be careful" and "don't do it" and it's in their failure to see that difference that critics go wrong.

I think I can most tellingly bring out my thought by drawing an analogy between painting and music.

To declare (in the art of painting) that a certain procedure is "bad" because it tires fast and that another procedure is "good" because it tires slowly is as fallacious as to declare (in the art of music) that a cymbal clash is "bad" and a series of notes played pianissimo on the clarinet are "good."

The fact that cymbal clashes can rather quickly be overdone does not require that they be omitted from the score. The fact that a quiet passage in the wood-wind stands up well against reiteration does not require that it be given a monopoly in the performance. It's a problem of *adjustment*, of varying the emphasis, controlling intensities, knowing when to stop and when to start in again — not *excluding*.

Occasionally you *can* show the outside of *both* the right and left hand, occasionally a head *can* be set straight above the shoulders, and occasionally a tangent *can* slip into a composition. In fact the complete abolition of these supposedly "wrong procedures" from painting could itself (like every taboo) become obtrusive — if continued too long. It would gradually transform all artists into what might be termed *teacher's pets* — men who would remain pupils all their lives, men who would never take a gamble, never run a risk — a most undesirable eventuality, I believe you will concede.

Fatigue — once you admit that it's a factor in art — and of course, it's my contention that you *must* — clearly won't tolerate any such fantastic (and actually ridiculous) adjudications as those Mr. Canaday has risked making.

There are *trends towards similarity* in men's fatigue patterns, but never enough — even in the case of men who all possess a common level of high culture — to warrant positive statements about what their reactions would be, as I shall show in a moment, to transferring the little scrap of paper in Harnett's painting to the other side, or to having Vermeer's model turn her head to look out the window. It would take only a very slight variation of their conditions of tiredness (that of their early morning condition against their late evening condition, perhaps) to swing their preferences from one way to the other.

To pretend otherwise, and to make an important issue of it on page after page of what is supposed to be an authoritative course in art appreciation is an act of miseducation for which it is hard to find an excuse.

* * * * *

Let me make it clear, however, that what I have said must not be interpreted as meaning that composition becomes an insignificance — that it doesn't much matter what an artist does in arranging his picture.

Not at all. It may be true that certain compositional procedures can impart so high a speed of tiring that it would be senseless to include them in a painting which (very legitimately) is expected to withstand at least a second or two of gratifying contemplation.

But this merely indicates how wide the potentialities range from rapid to slow tiring and how correspondingly cautious a critic must be in delivering his opinions.

Actually, composition, in spite of (or perhaps because of) this incertitude and fallibility really becomes a much broader and more interesting concept than before.

Famous Paintings Before and After

In demonstrating to you, as practically as I know how, what would be the consequence of altering



La Grande Jatte, Seurat



Variant A

the composition of certain paintings, I am not trying to influence you either for or against those alterations. If you should *approve* of every one of them without exception, I would be as much surprised (and even disturbed by the coincidence) as if you were *opposed* to every one of them, without exception.

My purpose is to encourage your "ifs", your "perhaps", your "sometimes", your "it depends." I want you to feel that in art you are in an activity — something like the meteorologist's when he is forecasting next week's weather — wherein the man who is trying to do an honest job is extremely careful about making positive statements and is careful (most of all) not to force into your mind as certitudes what are merely whimsies of his own,

To talk of a "perfect" work of art is as ridiculous as to talk of a "perfect" sunset.

dreamed up to bolster the theory he wants, at the moment, to pull you on the band-wagon of.

It's because the Metropolitan, through Mr. Canaday, its spokesman, takes the opposite view that I have prepared this "exhibition."

And let's start with a painting by Seurat about which Mr. Canaday makes the following statement:

"His Sunday strollers . . . are disposed with such absolute nicety that the composition of this, among all pictures, can be tested by trying to imagine it with any shape changed, omitted or moved in the slightest degree."

Not only are these implications of perfection — or of one-best-wayism, as I like to call it — ridiculous but they are also fraudulent and inexcusable, even in mere criticism and doubly so in what purports to be education.

Pin-point verdicts of this sort would be ridiculous even if all men were exact duplicates of each other; and they are all the more absurd when we consider the myriad variations of temperament and mood which are to be found even among men sharing the same high degree of culture.

Now I suggest that you turn to Variant A of this picture. To save you the trouble of "trying to imagine it with any shape changed, omitted or moved in the slightest degree", I have made such changes — nine of them. I shall not argue as to how clearly the aesthetic impact (to a cultured man) of this version would be the same as that of the original. I shall merely assert that if it were not known which was the "original" and which the "semi-replica" most people would not notice much difference between the two, and that even critics (under the assumption — and it's *some* assumption — that they were sincere men expressing their educated emotional reactions and not merely trying to validate their "aesthetic principles") would be about equally divided in their preferences.

Next, let's examine Variants B and C. Decidedly more radical alterations have been made in these two. Persons as well as objects have been omitted, twisted, moved, substituted and otherwise thoroughly transmogrified; so much so that a critic might be honestly justified in having a considerably greater liking for one version over the other. Or, to express it in different words, whatever, preference he at first possessed would be of a more permanent type than in the case of Variant A; because a sharper change in his regimen or philosophy of life would be required to make him renounce his former allegiance.

Yet I don't think that this greater swing of opinion can be ascribed to any infraction of composition's "principles." In my opinion no alterations have been made which *necessarily* modify speeds of tiring. Even the omitting (in one version) of the male figure from the couple in the foreground (except that it might require a repainting of his companion's right hand and forearm to avoid the obtrusively cramped rendition which had previously passed unnoticed against the man's coat) hasn't enough impact to disorganize the general effect.



Variant B



Variant C

Sentimental Nonsense

"One steps into Amiens or Chartres or Notre Dame de Paris (cathedrals) and instantly one's everyday consciousness of the world is blotted out. Thought is stilled. The common and immediate senses are overwhelmed, cease to grasp detail and to report impression in the usual way. A flood of emotion sweeps the inner faculties. One is suffused with feeling. Then comes the mood of mystic participation, of art possessing one's being." Sheldon Cheney, *A World History of Art*.

This isn't "art possessing one's being". It is merely the result of a sharp collision with an unusual emotion. And it's a highly temporary emotion — as is evidenced by the comparative calm with which the cathedral's sacristan (I feel sure) was going about his daily affairs at the time.



The Old Violin, Harnett



Variant D



Variant E

Let's consider Harnett next. Mr. Canaday's comment on this picture is as follows:

"... It is no accident that the bow is placed vertically, lining up with other verticals . . . The long arms of the hinges are placed on horizontal axes as precise as the verticals. They repeat the top and bottom lines of the canvas, but the bottom hinge is at a slightly greater distance from the edge of the picture than the top one is. Why? Because the hinges define a kind of secondary frame embracing the other objects, like the mats around some pictures. A good framer makes the bottom border of a mat wider than the top and sides, since it tends to look narrower if all four are uniform. The sheet of music and the envelope are turned almost forty-five degrees to the verticals and horizontals and are at almost identical angles to one another. If these were at exactly forty-five degrees the effect would be unpleasantly rigid . . . Imagine shifting any of these elements; imagine for instance eliminating the little scrap of printed paper or moving it to the other side exactly opposite the iron ring for more obvious balance, and you will see how carefully every object has been disposed and how arbitrarily."

Inasmuch as I have come out so strongly against positive assertions I must be careful about them myself. So I will only say that this comment *seems to me*, slightly more inept than the previous one. Perhaps it's because of the multiplicity of trivial details. Perhaps it's because mentioning the "good framer's" practice of making the bottom border wider than the top is a bit like preferring the cathedral at Rouen over that at Rheims because you didn't trip over a broken step on entering it whereas at Rheims you did. Or perhaps it's because in approving certain compositional devices here, e.g.,

the bow being "placed vertically, lining up with other verticals", the hinges being "on horizontal axes as precise as the verticals", the sheet of music and envelope being "at almost identical angles to one another", and so on, Mr. Canaday seems to be going exactly contrary to his usual condemnation of precisionism.

And a similar abandonment of principle enables him to turn sharply on "balance" (customarily one of his favorites) and denounce it as a villain by calling it *obvious balance*. I bring out these minor points not merely to find fault with Mr. Canaday but because they reveal, first, the contradictions which critics are inevitably driven into in their effort to ignore fatigue; and, second, how fatigue pushes its way in despite their efforts to keep it out. Clearly the actual objection to *more obvious balance* would be that it would tire too fast, in the same way that the centrally-placed spot in Figure A (on a previous page) tires too fast. But try to catch a critic being honest and saying so.

In Variant D the only alteration is the shifting of the scrap of paper to the other side. I have not placed it exactly opposite the iron ring, however, because I agree with Mr. Canaday that the balance there would probably be too obvious — that is, that it would tire too fast in that position. Where it is, seems to maintain about the same rate of tiring as in the original position.

In Variant E the alteration is only in the angle of the envelope to the horizontals. If Harnett had originally painted the envelope in this position I believe Mr. Canaday would have highly praised him for the correctness of his composition in so doing. For not only would the angle's distance from the rigidity of forty-five degrees have been increased enough so that the eye would no longer be disturbed by the previously dangerous proximity to that rigidity; but also the "manifestly incor-

rect" tangency of one corner of the envelope to the bottom edge of the picture would have been eliminated.

* * * * *

One of Mr. Canaday's more reprehensible habits in giving you an *education in art* (through the Metropolitan's "seminars") is to make a dogmatic assertion and then "demonstrate" its correctness by "evidence" which he has manufactured out of his own particular — and extremely personal — assortment of emotions.

In the last chapter I discussed his allegation, for example, that Ingres' portrait of Madame LeBlanc was inferior to Renoir's portrait of Madame Renoir because, according to Mr. Canaday, Ingres presented to us nothing but an "entrancing effigy", and made "no attempt to explore the personality of the sitter", whereas Renoir, in painting Madame Renoir, revealed what Mr. Canaday referred to as her "deeper meanings." And then to prove his point he launched into an elaborate description of what these deeper meanings were — namely the revealing of "woman as a basic universal symbol" as the "image of an earth goddess", and so on.

Okay, let's admit that every man is entitled to his own notions of which woman (if any) looks



"Earth Goddess"?

like an earth goddess. Nevertheless, if a critic hinges an award of painting-merit on the (supposed) fact that the artist has painted into his portrait this quality of *being an earth goddess*, the fact that the painter has actually done so must have some more solid foundation than the critic's rhapsodizing fervently about his seeing it there.

The possibility that one, three or four persons out of a hundred might chance to share that perception is not nearly enough. A good, strong

A Science of the Future

The reason Art Criticism is not recognized as the science it would naturally become, if given a chance, is that it's a *conjectural* science, like meteorology and medicine, and not a *factual* science, like Astronomy, Physics or Geology.

It's easy to kill a conjectural science. You do it by pushing it ahead too fast and trying to make it accomplish too much.

For example, you could easily kill meteorology by forecasting the weather too far ahead. Or you could kill medicine by making positive statements where they are not warranted. Let the doctor deliver incontrovertible diagnoses, let him declare Medicament A (digitalis or quinine, or insulin) to be good not "sometimes", not "for certain people under certain circumstances", but *always, for everybody*, and medicine reverts to the quackery it was two hundred years ago.

It's by misdemeanors of that sort that critics have been destroying art criticism and making quacks out of themselves — and dupes out of you — and it's really hard to see how they could have been so stupid and for so long a time.

All that is necessary to end this malpractice — as I shall show you later — is for critics to move ahead slowly and carefully — to stop enunciating infallible and eternal verdicts and be satisfied (as are the meteorologist and physician) with delivering the best guesses possible at the time — in hopes of gradually learning to deliver better ones, later on.

majority is necessary when it's a question of education. Otherwise, it's just a whimsy.*

And even more than this is involved. The reaction "she's an earth goddess" must be a reaction which only a few other portraits of women induce. Or to put it another way, if a good-sized group of men ("softies" would be a better word to describe them, I think) agree with Mr. Canaday's dictum that Renoir has caused Madame Renoir to look like an earth goddess, then for that fact to be important they mustn't go around (and I'm afraid they would) seeing earth goddesses everywhere. Doing so would kill the idea just as surely.

Possibly you may think I'm making too much of a minor point; and if this were the only time Mr. Canaday indulges in the practice you would be right. But it isn't. I could cite you a hundred passages where his purely personal reactions are used as though they were solid evidence of the principles he enunciates.

His above-quoted comments about the Seurat and Harnett pictures illustrate this tendency of his, but it is even more noticeable in what he says about the Vermeer picture — as follows:

"In Vermeer's painting we look into the cube-like space of an artist's studio. This space is defined for us on all six sides. The back wall faces us directly. The front wall is expressed by the heavy curtain drawn aside to let us look within the space as if it were a stage. Without having to think about it or figure it out, we sense the windowed wall to our left in the flow of light onto the model and across the space of the room. The wall to our right is also defined by inference. The chandelier, which would be near the center of the ceiling, helps us locate it, as does the position of the large decorative map on the rear wall and the chair lined up with its edge.

"There is no feeling that the various objects are rigidly placed, but their relationship in space is so perfect that if we try to shift any one of them the serene balance of the picture is disturbed. Would you, for instance, want the model to turn her head so that, in profile, she looks out of the window. This would be a small change, but it would disrupt the picture. It would make us too conscious of the window wall. We would be tempted to follow the model's gaze into the imagined world outdoors, instead of remaining happily within the defined space of the studio . . . the whole structure falls to pieces."

I have no desire to restrict Mr. Canaday's (or any man's) "interpretations." He can allege, if he desires, that Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* suggests having tea out on the lawn, that Ravel's *Bolero* reminds him of a swan floating down the Hudson

River or that Henry James', *Portrait of a Lady* makes him feel that the sky has turned purple. But I resent strongly his (and the Metropolitan Museum's) trying to make you think that one man's whimsies (even if not quite so fantastic as the above) can be used to prove a principle and impart an education.

Mr. Canaday's elaborate build-up of a "cube-shaped space" accomplished, in part, by the Ellery Queenish "clue" of the chandelier's being more probably a centrally-located one than one of a pair, is exactly that — a whimsy, and nothing more — something to steam up the atmosphere and put you in the mood to fall for his latest one-best-wayism — namely that it would be terrible if the model turned her head to look out the window on the ground that you would then be "tempted to follow the model's gaze into the imagined world outdoors, instead of remaining happily within the defined space of the studio."

It's an effort to make you think that his purely *personal* — and *accidental* — reactions are not that but are the *necessary* and *typical* reactions of all (or most) sensitive and artistic men and will be yours as soon as he and the museum have got you properly educated.

It isn't so. It's just downright humbuggery. What's happening is that you are being *talked down to* (here and, in fact, all through the seminars) in much the patronizing mood of grandpa telling the trustful young child that the way to catch a bird is to put salt on its tail. You are the ignoramus, the easy-mark; and Art is so far over your head (supposedly) that being careful and staying within the bounds of reason isn't worth the bother.

Now as you turn your attention to Variant F, wherein I have committed exactly that alleged abomination of turning the model's head, let me emphasize again that I make no claim that the painting is "better" that way, I merely assert — as I did in comparing Variant A of the Seurat picture with the original — that if a group of critics could conceivably be assembled who did not know about this change having been made by another person than Vermeer then their expressions of preferences would by no means be unanimous either way. It would be much more likely, I think, that their opinions would be fairly evenly divided. And it is not at all unbelievable that a majority would prefer "my" variant.

For your amusement, here is one such interpretation — favoring the variant.

How wonderfully Vermeer's genius for correct composition brings home to us the basic theme of this picture — namely man's eternal revolt against a tame and monotonous life.

The idea is first expressed to us by his emphasizing that a room — like all rooms — has four walls a floor and a ceiling. Then the longing to escape from being shut within this tiny cube-shaped world is gradually kindled in our hearts.

The map starts it. Besides echoing beautifully the rectangular shape of the walls and of

*When some of this material was first printed in the magazine, CRITICAL, it resulted in correspondence between the Metropolitan Museum and a subscriber to its *Seminars* in which the museum protested strongly against my using the term "whimsy" as applicable to the earth-goddess gag. The museum preferred to call it a "documented interpretation." For the correspondence in full, see Appendix B.



The Artist in His Studio, Vermeer

the floor tiling, the map (and it is no accident that it hangs vertically) introduces the prospect of travel in the outside world. Next our glance turns *leftwards* (as diminishing intervals in that direction cause it to turn) and collides gloriously with the flood of light streaming in through the window which we cannot see but know must be there; thus stimulating our imagination and intensifying still more our desire to "get way from it all." The model's strange accoutrements — the trumpet, the enormous tome (a book of travels perhaps) the crown of leaves — further accentuate the attraction of the exotic and different. And finally — and most exciting of all — is the amazing ecstasy and fullness of soul which Vermeer has so wonderfully depicted on his model's face as what she sees through the window raises her hopes that a new and richer



Variant F

future may be hers — perhaps with the artist himself whose face, though we cannot see it, we know must share her vision.

Not an element of this miraculous composition could be altered, moved, elaborated or modified without destroying its perfect integration and unity. Imagine turning the model's head so that she was looking into the restricted area of the studio instead of into the beyond!! It would disrupt the picture — the whole structure would fall to pieces.

Well there you are. As to which is the sillier, our concoction or Mr. Canaday's, I prefer not to decide. I will merely assert — and emphatically — first, that *both* of them are silly and, second, that there is less excuse for Mr. Canaday's because it is meant to be *taken seriously as education*, whereas ours isn't.

Chapter IV

The Conflict Picture

Obviously the rather angry and rambunctious tone which pervades this book — however justified it may be — soon acquires, I myself must concede, a high rate of tiring.

So if you have been getting too much fault-finding and iconoclasm lately I suggest — in compliance with my own principles — that you shy away from this chapter until you have been able to correct the unbalance by giving your life a smoother flavor.

On the other hand, if even my diatribes and fulminations have not yet been enough to offset the overdoses of high-hattery, moonshine and sentimentality which the professional aesthetes persist in deluging you with under the guise of “education” (as unfortunately exemplified by the Metropolitan Museum’s Seminars in Art) then I have, I believe, two more particularly acrid de-bunkings, two more especially icy hard-boiledisms which may help.

And lest you conclude from the somewhat jocular tone of this introduction that I am not serious in my condemnation of the misdemeanors which I shall endeavor to expose, let me assure you that I am.

They are highly corrupt and objectionable; and all the more so because they result not from merely stupid and innocent mistakes — as did the old beliefs that nature abhors a vacuum or that “ring snakes” grasp their tails in their mouths and roll down hill — but from shrewderies, circumventions, equivocations intended to support a self-serving and (I regret to say) solidly-intrenched sanctimony. And do not conclude, either, that in my zeal to condemn and eradicate them I am willing to resort to any evasions, illogicalities or exaggerations that will contribute to that purpose.

Not at all; as I believe you will see for yourself if you give your main attention — as you should — to the veracity of the statements I make and less attention to the sometimes contentious language in which the statements are expressed.

And now — hoping you will pardon the digression — let’s get down to business.

I am compelled to start this chapter by being a bit philosophical (or semantic).

After all, art is too complex a subject to be discussed with the same vocabulary that a child can use to explain, for example, why he wants a drink of water — to wit: “I’m thirsty.”

To explain in a like manner, why you enjoy an art work by saying “because it’s beautiful”, doesn’t really take you even up to the high school level.

Beautiful is one of the trickiest words in the language. It can mean *meeting certain “standards*

of beauty” — with an obligation to specify those standards. Or it can mean *pleasurable*, with an obligation to specify pleasurable *to whom, when, and for how long*. Or it can have a mystic or metaphysical meaning implying the existence of some ultimate and “absolute” beauty as to the nature of which man can only make vague and tentative guesses until the full secret comes out on the day of judgment. And so on.

But any way you care to look at it, you really can’t take even the first step in art-education without explaining which meaning is your favorite — and then sticking to it.* The author of the Museum’s seminars — Mr. John Canaday, makes no attempt, so far as I can see, to do so. On the contrary, he tosses the word about with complete irresponsibility as though its meaning were as simple as that of *hot, green, boat, tobacco, dozen* or *F-sharp*; and were as universally understood.

The fact that nine men out of ten do the same does not excuse him. He is supposed to be teaching — not merely sliding through life in the easiest way, as they are.

When he declares a landscape to be “beautiful”, or a woman’s figure to be “beautifully painted”, or an arrangement of colors to be “beautiful”, his saying so ought to convey a particular *impression* to his readers, based on the meaning he has chosen, not confront them with a riddle.

To illustrate the confusion which carelessness such as this leads to let’s consider two paintings, the first (Figure 20) by Picasso, the second (Figure 21) by Rouault.

Mr. Canaday, after describing the Picasso as “a prodigious effort to discover new means of expression, not for the sake of their newness but for the sake of increasing the scope and intensity of the art of painting”, goes on as follows:

“The chief fault of *Les Demoiselles*, one that keeps it from being a satisfying picture in its own right is exactly the fault that the average layman is first likely to find with it: we are never able to break away from the fact that these *demoiselles* are, after all, five exceptionally unlovely female figures.”

Now compare this with Mr. Canaday’s comments on the Rouault. Its subject, he says, is “two hideously naked prostitutes.” And then he goes on to explain that, “the painting is a condemnation, an accusation against a world that can be so brutalizing and degrading,” and after that to describe the women’s bodies as “heavy, lumpy forms that are indeed ugly, as bodies” and the color as “scrubby, roughly applied, suggestive of fresh tints turned morbid, as if affected by the evil the painter reveals.”

So far all is well. But then comes the trick sentence — the metaphysical double-cross:

“But, of course, *Two Nudes* is a beautiful picture.”

Pow! everything goes up in smoke. The unbeau-

*The meaning which I advocate is: *Temporarily possessing a high probability of being pleasurable in relation to one man or a group of men, whom I have in mind, either for the moment or for the future.*



Figure 20; Les Femmes d'Alger, Picasso

ties or ugliness he has just been discussing are not merely overbalanced by the beauties (which could be understandable, in the way that a woman can be beautiful in spite of an ugly nose or mouth) but they are completely wiped out. They never really existed; they only *seemed* to exist. Obviously the *mystic* sense of beautiful has taken control here. Nothing else could account for this amazing vanishment.

If our never being able "to break away from the fact — in the Picasso picture — that these *demoiselles* are, after all, five exceptionally unlovely female figures", prevents the Picasso from being "satisfying" why do not the "hideously naked prostitutes" etc., have a similarly harmful effect on the Rouault?

Mr. Canaday then proceeds to "explain" this "miracle" with three paragraphs of as mixed up a juggling with words as you will find anywhere in criticism — and that's saying something.

"Technically it [the picture] is beautiful," he says "in the absolute control of drawing. For all the appearance of coarseness and license, the thick boundaries of the forms are perfectly controlled to describe these forms, and to describe them with appropriate emphasis. Even the distortions are beautiful (!!) in their powerful expressive quality. . . . Finally, above all, the subject is not base or vulgar. It is noble, if faith in man's goodness is noble. The subject is not presented lasciviously. (Could vice be made more unattractive?) Nor is it presented in cynical acceptance of evil . . . In all Rouault's work there is a fundamental faith in man's redemption through his recognition of evil and his rejection of evil.

"It is in this implication that *Two Nudes* finds its meaning. We are shown ugliness in terms of such violence that we must recognize it — and reject it.



Figure 21! Two Nudes, Rouault

"From any other point of view *Two Nudes* is only a powerful repellent image of two grotesquely ugly, dehumanized creatures."

I don't think anybody could do it better. The effect of subtlety or profundity or vision or penetration — whatever you want to call it — is cleverly enough poured on so that the ordinary (and innocent) subscriber to the "course of instruction" swims along with the tide easily enough.

But let me assure you it's *not* teaching. It's dodging, weasel-wordery, equivocation.

The word "beautiful" is doing a masquerade act for you, coming up through different trap-doors each time, in a different personality.

First, it's being Mr. Mystic, as I showed you; then it's dressed up as *Standards* (drawing skill expressed in boundaries being perfectly controlled, etc.) then it switches to the ethical angle. And finally, in the last two paragraphs it snaps back to the mystic, when, in Mr. Canaday's words: "we are shown ugliness in terms of such violence that we must recognize it — and reject it."

Yet all the time "beautiful", in its role of *pleasurability*, is somewhere in the background, subconsciously.

This hopping about — this inconsistency of meaning — ending up with a positive verdict, supposedly summing up the whole story in one word,

"beautiful", doesn't contribute to a reader's education, but merely to his confusion and frustration. It leaves him hanging over a precipice by his thumbs, with nowhere to go.

And it is especially objectionable because, as I shall show later, there is a thoroughly simple and understandable way to describe the picture.

But first — and I hope you will pardon my piling on the pain a little longer — Mr. Canaday's tendency (previously remarked) to use his personal opinion (or "whimsies" as I have called them) to bolster up his argument is also on hand to make trouble.

Consider the following two sentences: "For all the appearance of coarseness and licence, the thick boundaries of the forms are perfectly controlled to describe these forms, and to describe them with appropriate emphasis. Even the distortions are beautiful (!) in their powerful, expressive quality."

I shall not argue as to the eternal rightness or wrongness of these appraisals. I will simply say that they are definitely Mr. Canaday's own and that there is plenty of room for disagreement about them.

As to the brush strokes being "perfectly controlled", for instance, an examination will show you numerous "repetitions" of strokes whose purpose clearly seems to be to correct the lack of perfect control in the previous strokes.

That's one case; and here is another which I should like to preface by reminding you, first, that when you hand a painter his brush and his colors he's *at home* — as Will Rogers was with his rope, as Victor Borge is at the piano, as Ted Williams is at the bat. He can exercise his skills in any one of a myriad ways. He can emphasize his hates, as Picasso did in *Guernica*; his social sarcasms, as Jack Levine has often done; his whimsicalities, in the style of Klee; his nostalgias, in the mood of Chirico; or his snobberies after the manner of Sargent. And he can do it *fast*.

And second, like all other men, he is open to extremely heated and transient moods in the course of expressing which (and in the hope of thus shaking them off) he may indulge in a wide diversity of acts (you might even call them "pranks") ranging from tipping over the table or kicking the dog; to painting a picture of two hideous prostitutes or going out to look for more attractive ones.

What I am trying to bring out here is that it is your privilege to draw the moral lesson from *Two Nudes* which Mr. Canaday calls to your attention *if you wish*, but that you have only his individual reading of Rouault's character by which to assume that the picture is "an outraged cry of protest against man's inhumanity to man, against corruption, meanness and human degradation", rather than a venting of the artist's rage after an unhappy — and possibly recent — experience.

The slashing, reckless brush strokes suggest that the picture could easily have been painted within the hour and that it thus conforms more to a sharp emotional recoil than to the ambitious purpose Mr. Canaday sees in it — for which a more complex and calculated procedure would appear required.

Now — lest my cynicism repel you — let me hasten to make it clear that my complaint is not

against Mr. Canaday's idealistic interpretation, but to his using — as he has so often previously done — what is a purely personal interpretation to carry his point — namely to convince you that some momentous and transcendent force has come into the picture which justifies his pronouncing it to be "beautiful" — regardless of its numerous (and admitted) uglinesses — which force would equally justify similarly "infallible verdicts" for whatever pictures, he might desire for personal reasons of his own, to "immortalize."

And I object to this procedure all the more when — as I said earlier — there seems so little reason for it — when, on the contrary, no excursions beyond rationality appear to be required.

So let's try to discuss *Two Nudes* in what I allege to be this "rational" method, thus giving the reader a sense of participation in the operation rather than the feeling of being dragged along by his heels.

And let's begin by describing *Two Nudes* as being of a certain category, comprising what might honestly be called *Mixture or Conflict Pictures*, in which two elements (or combinations of elements) — one pleasurable, another unpleasurable — are fighting each other. The emotional effect on the observer is somewhat similar to that which he might derive from a quick look into the chamber where a murderer was being placed on the electric chair.

Now, remembering what I previously said about the gifted painter being capable of displaying his talents in any one of a myriad ways — and with amazing facility and speed — I would like to suggest that you have no right (and probably not even the desire) to deny him the privilege to paint a picture of this type, when he wants to, despite the fact that it obviously has a high speed of tiring and that critics — obsessed by their criterion of endurance and the "immortality of art" — consequently disapprove of it, as "ephemeral" or "mere entertainment," etc.

There are innumerable paintings around — and by famous artists — which have been created in this humor, I believe. I say this not to disparage them but only to emphasize how wrong it is to apply the same standards to all kinds of paintings and how even wronger it is to try — as Mr. Canaday has tried — to build up a painting of this kind into "a timeless masterpiece" by pushing into it the assortment of deeper meanings and drawing "miracles" which he claims he sees there.

In my opinion, *Two Nudes*, emphatically belongs in this conflict type. Taking everything into account, and granting its possession of the (nevertheless somewhat hackneyed) subject which Mr. Canaday ascribes to it; taking into account the heavy, haphazard and obtrusive brush strokes, the "scrubby" colors and so on, it is inevitably a very fast-tiring picture. There are too many areas from which you must turn away quickly and too few where the eye can linger, for the picture to possess any great resistance to reiteration.

I cannot conceive of any man in the interest solely of visual enjoyment (disregarding the enjoyments derivable from advertising the fact that he owns a Rouault, or the enjoyment derivable from stimulating the controversial remarks of his guests) having the desire to hang the picture in his living room.

In a remote hall through which he occasionally passes on his way elsewhere, perhaps — for a short, sharp tingle of enjoyment. But in the living room, no. It would be like having no chairs in the room to sit down in — a perpetual discomfort.

Of course to deliver any such conditional, namby-pamby, self-contradictory verdict as the above would stagger the orthodox critic. To him any battle of beauty against ugliness inside a painting worthy of serious discussion, can end only in one way — in a complete victory for beauty. No compromise is possible.

Hence Mr. Canaday's magisterial decree, "but of course *Two Nudes* is a beautiful picture."

It has no logical meaning, but is simply the customary deference to established tradition.

Mr. Canaday has some excuse for his error from the fact that the "conflict picture", as I use the phrase, is a comparatively recent development in art. Very rarely, if ever, did the "old masters" paint works which could thus be described.

Only since what we call "modern art" began have artists deliberately and on purpose made a "battle ground" of their canvases.

However, since I have prepared for you, on another page, some special material on the CONFLICT PICTURE, let's turn our attention to a matter which I especially wish to emphasize in this chapter — that, despite the critic's fervent adherence to the old bromide about art being immortal, doubts about it have been boring into his soul.

I reach this conclusion from observing the cold-shivers with which he now piles up sand-bags around his credo and the near-panic with which he sticks his finger into every hole in his dike through which reality is oozing in — as exemplified by the "discovery" (an important new gap) reported at right. Even more confirmative of my surmise was the reaction of critics some twenty years ago, when certain man-created paintings (or drawings) were discovered in the Lascaux caves in southern France and when — on top of that — they were estimated (amazingly) as being at least ten thousand years old, thus antedating all previously known works of art.

The normal man, on reading the news at his breakfast table, may have said "Well, well; good for the old boys; let's go and have a look some day, Emma. How about another cup of coffee."

Critics, on the other hand — and we must give them credit for their perspicacity even in an evil cause — at once recognized the event as what it was (to them), a bolt-from-the-blue of immense and far-reaching potentiality — not to take advantage of which would be an unforgivable negligence.

Breathless gasps of adoration, hosannas, paeans, jubilations and hallelujahs burst from their lips with a unanimity and ardor which revealed (but only to the few rationally minded men who were observing them at the time) how worried they had previously been about the efficacy of their dike and how much safer they now felt behind it.

"Those cave-men, and those cave-drawings — amazing, unbelievable, what genius, what beauty!

Eternal, timeless, ever-enduring, etc., etc. Let nobody ever dare say again that art isn't immortal. This proves it."

In such a hurricane of voices it is naturally difficult to know who was the first to speak, or the most fervid in his utterances.

But here is one comment, as a sample.

"The paleolithic man, some ten thousand years before our era, created some drawings which are far above everything which the civilized artist could accomplish in the line of animal drawings."

Who was the author of this particular bit of bombast? Roger Fry, the famous critic, and a former director of the Metropolitan Museum.

Let's not exaggerate the importance of this coincidence. The chances are that the Museum would

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Figure 22; Lascaux Cave Pictures

Important New Gap Is Discovered

Granville Hicks announces it in his article, *As Fiction Faces the Sixties*.*

After pointing out that "if a genius appears in the Sixties, he will give our literature a new direction" and that "if no genius does appear, it seems probable that our literature will continue in the direction in which it has been moving in the Fifties" he remarks:

"I also expect that the gap between serious fiction and popular fiction will widen."

If true, this gap could easily be one of the most notable in the world — making the gaps between hot and cold, white and light-grey, today and tomorrow seem like nothing.

Some skeptics, however, are inclined to think that the HICKS GAP is the same gap, though under another name, as that discovered jointly by two other explorers, and reported by one of them as follows: —

No calipers exist to measure the relative greatness of great novels. It is more useful rather to respect the judgment of J. Donald Adams. "Reading it (*War and Peace*) again and again is to realize the immeasurable gulf that is fixed between a merely good book and a great one." Clifton Fadiman, in *Party of One*.

*In Saturday Review, January 2, 1960.

What a Conflict Picture Does

It simultaneously attracts and repels — as does a moving picture of a fatal accident at the Automobile Race-track. The word “beautiful” can hardly be applied to it without appropriate qualification.

To many artists the painting of a Conflict Picture is a challenge. The idea of starting out with a subject which in itself possesses a high probability and degree of ugliness and then endeavoring to *paint out*, so to speak, as much of that ugliness as possible, through their own painting skills, has a decided appeal.

By all means let them have their fun that way as often as they wish. I suggest only that they embark on the project with a knowledge of what must necessarily be the outcome. The picture can never be wholly beautiful or pleasurable, as more “conventional” pictures can be. It must always be a compromise, depending on the degree in which one of the contending forces predominates over the other, and on how much it predominates.

And I doubt also if it can ever be a reposeful or slow-tiring picture. Too much is happening in it for any such sense of serenity to prevail.

But this must not be interpreted as a disparagement of the “conflict picture”. To exile it from art would be as narrowing as to exile any other “aesthetic flavor.” Its sharp and biting tang is as essential an ingredient in the artist’s repertoire as is mustard or ginger in that of the kitchen chef.

The essential point, to the man who desires to “appreciate art” is that he see conflict pictures as what they are — and not let the critic fool him into trying to see them as marvelous “disappearing acts”, so to speak, in which the unattractive elements have supposedly — and miraculously — been “drowned out” by the attractive ones.

No aesthetic LAW exists which requires the observer to exclude from his perception *one* set of reactions and see only a *second* set which he has been told is the supposedly correct one. In fact, an understanding of such artists as Cézanne, Munch, Nolde, Kokoschka, de Kooning and many others has been delayed and made more difficult by the critic’s insistence that the “mixtures” which these artists occasionally made were not mixtures at all but were “solid beauty” all through.

I call your attention to Roger Fry’s remarks — as quoted under Corot’s NUDE (figure 23) wherein he tries thus to mislead you. The only possible result from his effort to force on you (in his last sentence) the complete beauty of the picture is to convince you that something must be radically wrong either with you or Roger Fry.

As an illuminating demonstration of how easily Mr. Fry thinks it ought to be for any man to exclude from his perception *one* set of reactions (no matter how obtrusive) and perceive only a second (supposedly “correct”) set of them, I append another of his enunciations.

“No one who has a real understanding of the art of painting attaches any importance to what we call the subject of a picture — what is represented. To one who feels the language of pictorial form all depends, on how it is presented, *nothing* on what is.”



Figure 23, Nude, by Corot

“One must suppose that the decidedly plain model, who had lost her youthful charms, began to undress for the pose when Corot stopped her because he had been quick enough to see that there lay his subject. He has made no attempt to find a pretext for it; this is, in the ordinary sense of the word, no subject at all. *And yet, what he has seen is a marvel of pictorial beauty.*” Roger Fry.

A man betrays his ignorance of art not by what art works he likes or fails to like but by the poverty and primitivism of his ideas about them.

(Continued from page 37)

have caught the virus merely from its deadly pervasion of the critical atmosphere. But so direct and positive an inoculation may account for the Museum's being still so deeply infected by it — may account as well for the near-delirium of words with which Mr. Canaday describes the cave-paintings in the seminars, as follows:

"The tribal artists who decorated the walls of the ritual cave of Lascaux in southern France must be included among the great painters of all time. Aside from their fascinating evocation of a life infinitely removed from ours, one which they bring overwhelmingly close, these are great paintings. They would be great paintings if they had been done yesterday.

"They swarm over the walls of the cave, brilliantly fresh, magnificently alive. Our detail shows two bison [Fig. 22]. How passionately the artist has observed these animals! He sums up the idea of 'bison' in the most acute and economical way — the powerful forequarters, the small taut hindquarters, the contrasting bony delicacy of hoofs and shins, the brutishness of the head, the menacing curve of the horns. Everything is understood in its essence, and the essential quality is expressed by the most effective degree of emphasis.

"If they had been painted today we might call these bison expressionistic. The exaggeration very nearly reaches the point of distortion. A contemporary artist painting in this manner would be working from the consciously held theory that the image would be most intense if every element — forequarters, hindquarters, hoofs and shins, head, horns — were distorted to intensify its character. The power, the tautness, the brutishness, the menace, the delicacy of the various parts of the animal would be analyzed in relation to one another. Did the cave painter analyze first, then paint? It is easy to imagine him as a more primitive creator than he may have been. Of course we cannot know. But the images these artists have left are too deft and too consistently skilled to be the product of some freakish natural talents. They are real, less in the sense of looking like the animals (although they do that) than in the sense of expressing their emotional realness as men knew them."

Pretty high fever, eh!!

How completely (if at all) the Metropolitan Museum's prestige has numbed your capacities for independent thought, I do not know. But if its effort to achieve that end has not yet been fully

The Lollypop School of Art

Critics who adopt endurance as a criterion of art are a little like a confectioner who refuses to sell anything in his shop except all-day suckers.

consummated I urge you to wrench yourself free at least long enough to apply to this effusion the same cold analysis that you would to a salesman's spiel for his uranium mine.

And if you're a bit punch-drunk after Mr. Canaday's barrage of loaded adjectives, heated-up culture, haughty teacher-knows-bestisms and so on, take it easy until the brain clears.

* * * * *

Okay now?

Then, let me assure you that the effort to pile all this earth-shaking import on a couple of sketchy bison-pictures is just plain nonsense. It's like trying to build the Empire State Building on a scaffolding of two-by-four planks. It can't be done.

The paintings (no matter how awe-inspiring may have been the traversing of the underground passage to reach them) haven't nearly enough scope of achievement or compositional complexity to warrant such portentous and staggering a glorification.

The far-ranging, opulent, plenteous emotions which are requisite for any prolonged, durable and frequently-repeated contemplation of a painting — (such as are available, for example, in most paintings by "great masters") simply are not there — except in the minds of those who have caught the same eruptive fever (accompanied by high blood pressure) that is apparently raging in the Metropolitan Museum.

A quick, surprised — and admiring — look at the pictures accompanied by the appropriate philosophical ruminations about man's destiny, another glance (out of curiosity) three months later and then a consignment of them to reproduction on the pages of a book on art history, is about all they can stand.

In saying this I am not attempting an *artistic appraisal* of the paintings. I am expressing their emotional limitations. I am expressing my belief (in contrast with Mr. Canaday's) that you would feel much the same disinclination to magniloquize about them — much the same preference for not saying a great deal — that you would if somebody should confront you with the pen Walt Whitman used when writing *Leaves of Grass* and ask you how much you loved it. Unless you throw away sincerity, any great flow of eloquence is impossible.

However, that's merely an introductory comment, intended to sum up in advance, and as briefly and naturally as possible, the practical and human significance of the cave paintings.

Let's proceed now to look into the validity (if any) of Mr. Canaday's effort to prove how insensitive and incorrect any such cool reaction would be.

First let me remind you that there is nothing new about primitive art — and nothing new, either, in the fact that civilized men, when first brought into contact with it — whether from Asia, Egypt or Central Africa — are usually strongly attracted to it and even influenced in their own art, thereafter.

The appeal of novelty is at work on them — analogous to the pleasant reaction felt when they step

off the airplane in Japan, Saudi Arabia, Lapland, Paris, Corsica, Pigmy-Land, Ethiopia, Rome — or any place that is “foreign” to them.

Primitive men, being free from our assortment of inhibitions (and subservient to different — and often startling — inhibitions of their own) possessing alien religions, “queer” customs, and “voodoo” superstitions; dwelling in caves, depending on the hunting of animals for their sustenance and so on, would *inevitably* create in a different flavor. It would be impossible not to do so.

It is true that as the differences increase in consequence from mere differences of temperament and maturity of age, to differences of race, of epoch and of geographic residence they become more influential.

Civilization eventually absorbs them, nevertheless; and as it does so, their novelty — and consequently their resistance to reiteration — subsides.

You may, if you wish, attempt to estimate the degree of difference which certain exemplars of primitive art (e.g. cave paintings) possessed at the times of their first collision with “civilized art” and conclude from that how great a contribution to civilized art they finally delivered. But in that case you are appraising a historical exploit (like climbing Mt. Everest) and not appraising “beauty” as of the present moment.

Not only that, but even if you appraise the Lascaux paintings as exploits-already-accomplished they appear to me as having done much less than did the statuettes and art objects (see figure 24) of African tribes when they came into contact with our world in the last century. Our sculpture — and even our painting — have been strikingly affected by them. Whereas I can't conceive of any painter being induced to change his style by the cave paintings.

Yet nobody — so far as I know — has been rash enough to hail the creators of these statuettes as “among the great artists of all time”, or to declare, as a consequence, that the architecture of the King's Palace in Fumban, largely composed of them (see figure 25) was comparable in “beauty” for instance, to the palaces at Versailles or Fontainebleau.

No, the fact that the Lascaux cave paintings were created ten thousand (or more) years ago gave them, I concede, a temporary “shock” importance; which has by now declined to a merely *historical* importance, already possessed (in varying degrees) by some millions of other art works.

This does not mean that they cannot temporarily emerge from the “general run” — as can any art work under the ups and downs of fatigue — and be pleasurably contemplated. I would estimate the chances as decidedly against its happening, however.

Or if you should attempt to defend Mr. Canaday on the ground that when he calls the cave paintings “great” he means that they are great when we consider who painted them or when we consider under what circumstances they were painted (in the way that we might call a painting “great” considering that it was painted by a man who was holding the brush in his teeth) that also collapses because

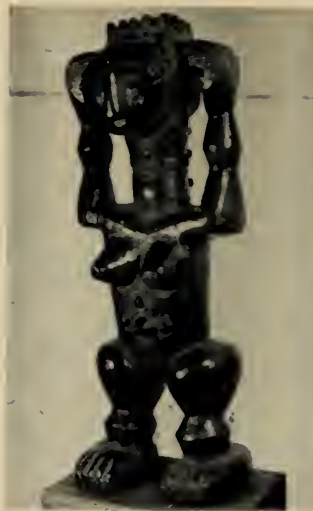


Figure 24; Statuette*. Ivory Coast. The idea, “woman”, by an African Sculptor.



Figure 25; King's Palace, Fumban.**

Mr. Canaday especially points out that the paintings would be great “even if they had been done yesterday.”

And (parenthetically) let me remind you that these adjudications cannot be at least partly warranted, as so many others have been, by the “test of time.” Even if you accept that old phony it does not apply here because a mere twenty years have elapsed since the discovery of the paintings. That makes them younger in their impact on man than: *Old Man River*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Nude Descending Staircase*, *Yes We Have No Bananas*, *Spoon River Anthology*, *Ben Hur* and *American Gothic*.

Finally, let's look at the last of Mr. Canaday's criteria (the last, that is, omitting the criterion of metaphysics that the cave-paintings are great or immortal, *because*) upon which he so strongly depends — as an offset to the paintings' poverty of connotation, perhaps — namely their alleged capacity for summing up the idea “bison” in the most acute and economical way.

In several points it closely resembles another of Mr. Canaday's criteria (mentioned in previous articles) — that of appraising the merit of a portrait according to how well it reveals the sitter's personality. First, it is equally ancient and frayed. Second, it has the same purpose — to rescue the critic from an impasse when all his usual criteria have failed. Third, it is equally a fraud, and for the same reason — that it cannot be given actual application to any individual case. In other words, to select any single painting or drawing as the one which does the best job of summing up acutely and economically runs into so many obstacles of practicality as to nullify it. You can satisfy yourself of the truth of this statement — whether in relation to the idea, “bison”; the idea, “egg”, the ideas, “face”, “distance”, “love”, “menace”; or any others

*Photo. Ladislav Segy. African Sculpture Collection: Segy Gallery for African Art, New York.

**Photo. from Search for Form, Saarinen; Reinhold Pub. Corp.

you care to imagine, by the simple policy of *trying it yourself*. Which policy — as I have already shown, and propose to show again, later on — is regarded in the seminars as far inferior to that of saying over again what has been said before.

A million ways exist for summing up the “idea” *bison*; ranging from that which the cave-man drew in Lascaux to that on our “buffalo nickel”; from Frederic Remington’s rendition to that which characterizes the samples I have assembled for your inspection below.

Even assuming that it is eternally better, artistically, to sum up the idea “bison”, than to sum up

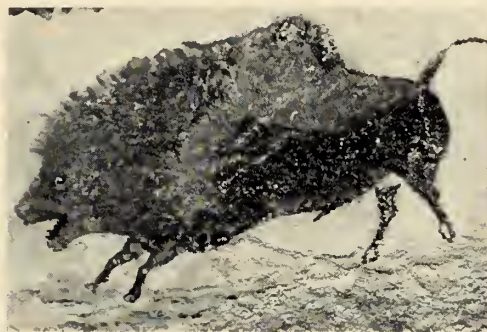
the idea “dream-bison”, or the idea “half-bison-half-horse”, or the idea “pseudo-bison” — and I don’t think it is — there can be no one best way of doing it.

I will merely assert — and firmly — that Mr. Canaday’s pronouncement of the necessary superiority in summing-up capacity possessed by the particular combination of “powerful forequarters, of small taut hindquarters, of contrasting bony delicacy of hoofs and shins” etc. which he sees in the paintings, as opposed to some other combination of slightly less powerful or more powerful

(Continued on page 42)



The Original
Unchanged, except that the second bison has been painted out.



Variant A
Front legs moved, jaw opened, and eye inserted.



Variant B
Legs made even more “delicate”, two horns instead of one.



Variant C
Forequarters more powerful, hump emphasized, legs heavier.



Variant D
Forequarters emphasized still more, only one horn again, but horn given more “beautiful” curve.

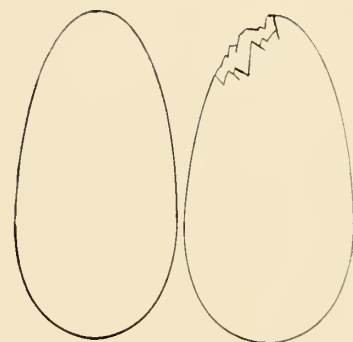


Fig. 26

Fig. 27

Which Variant Does The Best Summing Up?

In the effort to give a fair trial to the Metropolitan’s (and Mr. Canaday’s) theory about what makes a good summing-up of the idea, “bison”, I have “separated” the left-hand bison of the two, and created four “variants” of him with certain alterations in his shape.

Here are a few sample reactions to them, obtained at random from persons of more than average intelligence sitting on benches in Boston Common on a sunny day.

P. Revere L . . . (plumber, age 29, unmarried) “I’m afraid the cave-man, when he drew a bison with only one horn, must have been letting the idea, ‘rhinoceros’ mix in. Delicate shins are way off too. Variant C is much the best.”

Amy Q . . . (age 53, married, with four children, has seen only three bison in her life, two in a zoo, and one chasing her in a dream.) “I don’t know or care how many horns a bison has, but without that baleful eye and hungry jaw (in Variant A, her choice) the whole effect is lost.” Editor’s

note: Mrs. Q . . . might also have pointed out with what economy the additional acuteness of an eye was obtainable — merely by a dot — no trouble at all.

G. Barnard S . . . (Ph.D., age 42, art teacher) “I don’t mind the cave man’s single horn; the second horn might have been exactly behind the first horn, and thus invisible. However, I prefer the horn in Variant D. It’s more beautifully shaped, and adds vastly to the animal’s bisonism.”

Postscript: If you find the subject interesting, you may care to compare the relative merits for summing up the idea “egg”, of Figures 26 and 27.

Figure 26 is more economical but it is purely two-dimensional, and would serve almost equally well to sum up the idea “oval.” Figure 27 reveals the fact that an egg is fragile and has an interior, but even if it is thereby more “acute” in its summing up, it is also less “economical”; and really suits better as a conceivable summing up of the idea “broken-egg.”

(Continued from page 41)

forequarters; of hindquarters possessing other degrees of smallness and tautness; of uncontrasting instead of contrasting hoofs and shins is just plain nonsense. And so much so that there is no excuse for its having been allowed to remain in what the Metropolitan describes as a "carefully considered program of art education."

Now as you look over the competing "summations" of the idea "bison" which I have had prepared for your inspection I ask that you do not allow yourself to be repelled by the somewhat extravagant comments which I have attached to the drawings. Their extravagance arises from the extravagance of the original statement in the seminars and from the unfortunate necessity of taking seriously what so important an institution as the Metropolitan Museum of Art has seen fit to publish under its name.

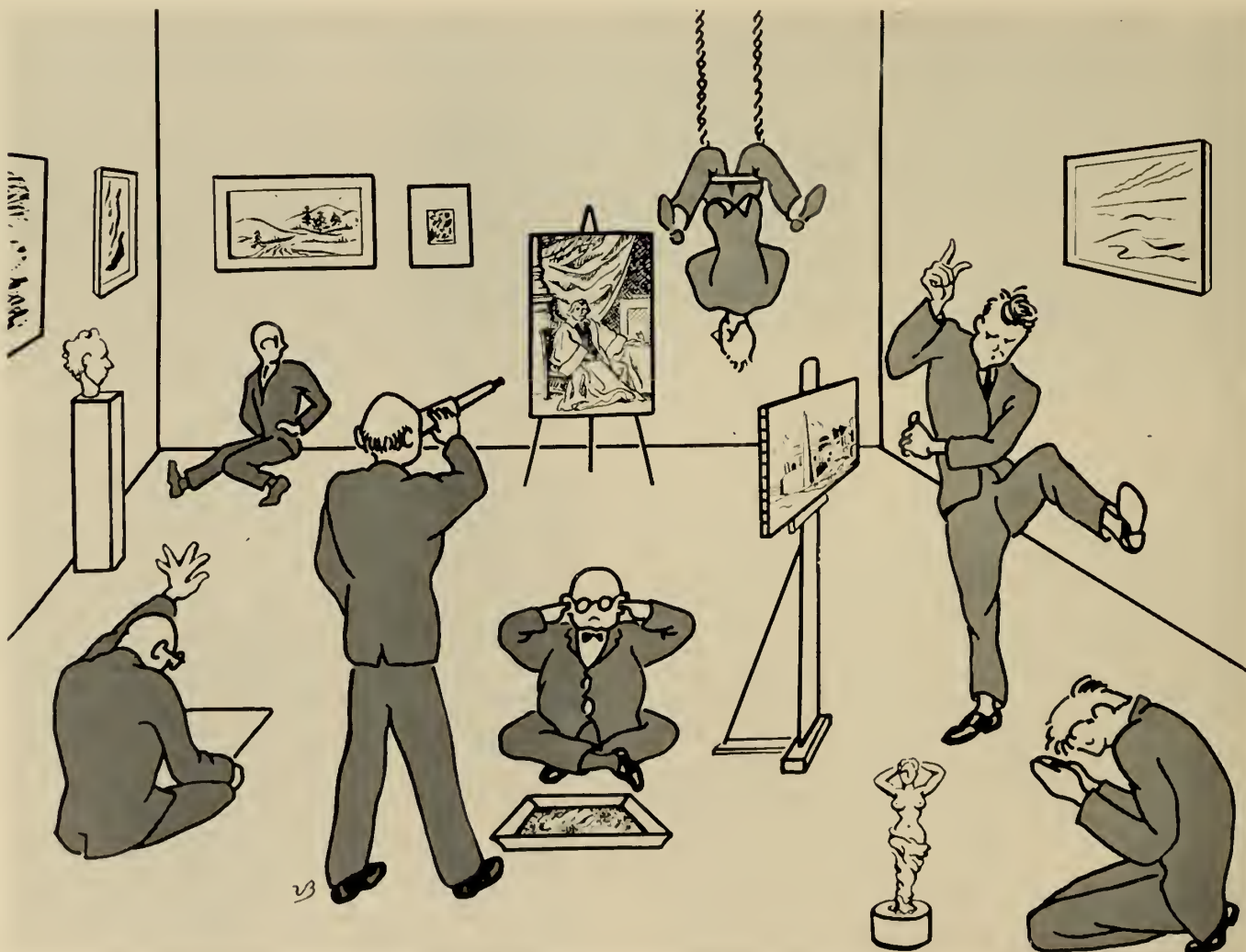
What I am trying to bring out is that, considering the infinite number of pictures of bison which could be produced; considering the infinite variations of temperament and viewpoint in individual men; considering, above all, the vagueness, fluctuation and uncertainty of the standard, *capacity to sum up*, the delivery of verdicts based on that standard is senseless.

And there is another objection to this perversion of teaching. Not only is it objectionable because it is false, but also because it is discouraging and frustrating. When the subscriber to the seminars is presented with the cave paintings and told what miraculous powers he is supposed to see in them — and when — no matter how hard he tries — he *can't* see them (and I assure you he can't, because they are not there) the result is to convince him either that he is temperamentally unfitted to understand art, or that it is impossible for anybody to understand it. Either conviction seems undesirable.

A third — and perhaps even worse — possibility exists, namely that he *pretends* to see, and thereafter becomes a sort of Zombie (or Ambulating Metropolitan Museum) reciting mechanically the set of credos he has memorized — thus tending to spread the malady even more widely.

* * * * *

If I have been successful in carrying you along with me in this article, you are perhaps wondering now how a well-known critic like Mr. Canaday (employed by the New York Times) and a great organization such as the Metropolitan Museum can have gone so far astray.



Critics trying to make themselves think art is immortal.

Perhaps I can best explain this by conceding first that the seminars are not *completely* without educational value. It would have been difficult to write them so that they were.

Even a man who was convinced that the earth was flat could produce a geography that was instructive in certain parts. He could tell you that Italy was shaped like a boot, that the Panama Canal joined the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, that New York was the name both of a city and a state — which information would be useful enough. But when he warned you to be careful on sailing north from Greenland or rounding Cape Horn to keep your eyes open lest you fall off the edge of solidity into open space you would be justified in suspecting even his previous truths and condemning the entire book as unreliable.

The Metropolitan's seminars have a decided resemblance to a book of that sort. Mr. Canaday provides much useful instruction about the techniques of water-color, fresco, etching, pastel; about baroque and gothic trends; about the lives of various painters, their personal problems and the influence on them of their epoch and its philosophies. All this is a *kind* of education, true, yet it is a *mechanical, anecdotal* kind — already available in hundreds of other books and in almost any encyclopedia. But it is not the kind of education which the Metropolitan declares its main purpose is to give — it is not an education in the *understanding of art*.

As soon as Mr. Canaday tackles *that* problem his intent to *teach* vanishes. He is interested only in perpetuating all the old fairy-tales, magniloquences and superstitions which critics have grafted into their business to boost it up into a zone of mysticism whence they can boom forth their "appraisals" with the best chance of retaining the "common man's" admiring — and abject — acceptance.

And now let me risk an appraisal of my own — purely personal, I admit — but possessing at least as high a probability of being correct as those which critics issue so glibly.

I would say that those critics (and this includes not only Mr. Fry and Mr. Canaday but a hundred others) who have praised the cave-drawings in terms approximating those I have quoted ("drawings which are far above everything which the civilized artist could produce", "included among the great painters of all time") do not, *in their hearts*, believe what they are saying.

They are "putting on an act", no matter how hard they are trying to convince themselves otherwise. They are mustering their forces behind a breach in their defences (their own and the public's suspicion that art isn't really immortal, after all) which is so dangerous to all of them combined that no single individual's qualms of conscience can be heeded. Their motivation can be expressed approximately in the following proportions:

Motive A: Desire to say something "startling", "original" and "subtle", 21 per cent.

Motive B: Desire to give confirmation to the dogma that *art is immortal*, 79 per cent.

Motive C: Desire to issue sound, rational and logical opinions, zero per cent.

I would not wish to assert that this unbalanced proportion characterizes all or even most critical adjudications but I will assert that Motives A and B are strong participants in many of them, that Motive C rarely, if ever, occupies the throne alone and that this statement is strongly applicable to all those portions of the Metropolitan's seminars where the objective is to explain "what art is", and provide an education in "understanding it."

As I come to the end of this rather gruesome and (I hope) disillusioning chapter I am afraid — since I have stormed so at the *sentimentality* which pervades criticism in general (including the seminars) — that you may have concluded that I am opposed to sentimentality, anywhere, at any time. Not so. Such a stand would be a condoning of the very dogma which I have been so violently protesting: one-best-wayism. Sentimentality is a necessary ingredient in art whether it be applied with an eye-dropper or a fire-hose, whether it be delivered by Shakespeare or Ella Wheeler Wilcox — both of whom, I assure you, have delivered it in both of the above manners. It's a question merely of proper manipulation.

However, if my zeal has carried me too far in the opposite direction and if some tender-hearted fellow has kept on reading as far as this in spite of mounting pain, I have an antidote all ready for him which will supply faster and better relief than going back to Mr. Canaday, and the seminars, where indeed, the sentimentality is shoveled on thick enough, heaven knows, but is often mixed in with extraneous material. Here (in a few concluding sentences of *Prisoner of Zenda*) I give it to him *solid*.

"One break comes every year in my quiet life. Then I go to Dresden; and there I am met by my dear friend and companion, Fritz von Tarlenheim . . . and as the hours grow small, at last we speak of Flavia! For every year Fritz carries with him to Dresden a little box; in it lies a red rose, and round the stalk of the rose is a slip of paper with the words written: 'Rudolf-Flavia-always.' And the like I send back by him . . . There are moments when I dare not think of it, but there are others when I rise in spirit to where she dwells; then I can thank God that I love the noblest lady in the world, the most gracious and beautiful. . . ."

Feel better now, old man?

Chapter V

Abstract Art and the Mystic

In case you are surprised — even dumfounded — (and I hope you are) at the inanities, quibblings and miscellaneous weaknesses-in-the-upper-story which allegedly intelligent men are guilty of (and seemingly get away with) in talking about art, I fear that there is only one explanation for your condition — namely that you have permitted your knowledge of human nature to lapse a bit — at least temporarily.

And in order to bring you back to reality let me call your attention to a question which was placed before Wernher Von Braun in connection with his recent and informative article*, *Life on Other Planets? Maybe*, as follows:

Question: Man's abode is the earth. Are we not invading God's Kingdom as we prepare for human travel through the universe?

Mr. Von Braun (and much to his credit) restrains what I believe must have been his first impulse — to collapse into a chair, cast his eyes hopelessly skyward and give up — and, instead, patiently supplies an answer from which I quote one paragraph.

"Is this beautiful planet earth, where we are at home, not just as much a part of God's Kingdom as the empty spaces around it, or as all the other stars and planets in the universe? He instilled in our hearts the curiosity about the worlds around us, and He enabled us to acquire the scientific knowledge and technological capability to satisfy it. If God really wanted man to stay on earth, I am certain He would have provided an impenetrable barrier and discouraged all our endeavors to cross it. But there is no evidence whatever of the existence of such a barrier."

No human blindness — no refusal to step out of the rut — ought to surprise you after that one.

These introductory remarks are intended not only to give you a helping hand (in case you could use it) but to reassure you if by chance you feel that we ourselves are in need of similar assistance.

So often have we been reminded that our effort to overcome the average man's apathy (and ignorance) about art is doomed to failure that we feel it necessary to explain how limited are our expect-

tations (as contrasted with our aspirations) of doing so.

Nobody can be more aware than are we of the unfortunate sap's determination to continue living in the dream-land into which he has been lured by the bombast that most critics, most art-dealers, many museum directors and some art-teachers find it helps their business to dispense.

So if you have been feeling rather sorry for us in our supposed fanaticism we thank you for your sympathy but assure you that it isn't necessary — that we concede to nobody a greater skepticism or world-weariness than our own.

However, regardless of rationality's warning pull at our coat-tails let's on with the "crusade" — merely making a shift in strategy.

Instead of striving as earnestly as we have been doing to prove to you that Fatigue is necessarily and always the dominating factor in art, instead of battling so fiercely with critics who pretend otherwise, let's simply try to reveal the trouble which their reprehensible obstinacy gets them (and us) into.

And it is plenty, I promise you.

In fact it is inevitable that it should. Any attempt to escape reality *must*.

Worse still, each attempt — and disappointment — leads to a more frenzied chase in another and screwier direction.

Impressionism, pointillism, cubism, surrealism all had their brief reign — and ended. Instead of being looked at naturally, as what they were — temporarily useful expedients for getting away from what men were tired of — they were hailed as *corrections* of what had been "wrong" (not merely wearisome) and as the final attainments of the "right."

And now we come to the latest of these cure-alls, Abstraction. I shall not go into the various theories intended to explain its superiorities to other art modes more than to say that one of them is in its *purity* — that is, in its being free (as music is) from entanglement with other art modes.

What concerns us much more closely is that abstraction has somehow taken the evils which have been infesting criticism for centuries and so enflamed them that (like a scratched mosquito bite) you can't ignore them any longer. They demand attention.

Evidence will appear in a moment, but first allow me to emphasize that I am not in the least opposed to abstraction *in principle*.

It is as legitimate as painting a portrait, or painting a landscape or painting a surrealism (in the style of Dali) or a fantasy (in the style of Bosch, Klee or Chagall) or a story (in the style of Frith or Gerome).

Misteaching and quackery happen to show up more quickly in abstraction than elsewhere, that's all — just as a flaw shows up more clearly in a pane of glass than in a steel bar.

There are a number of reasons for this — among them being the much sharper competition that exists in abstraction.

*In THIS WEEK Magazine, September 13, 1959.

First, you must remember that manual dexterity (or drawing skill) is only a minor factor in creating an abstraction. This does not mean that abstractions are created only by artists who don't know how to draw. That isn't so at all. It means only that they *can* be created by artists who don't know how to draw — thus opening up the field to a vast throng of new and often untrained practitioners.

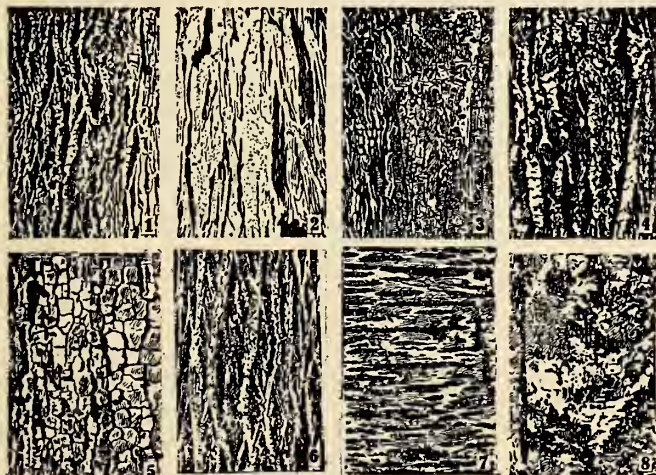
Second, the time required to produce an abstraction is usually decidedly less than for pictures in the ordinary style. There is less scope for fussing, for making advance “studies”, for revising and correcting. Even Kandinsky, Miro, Stuart Davis in their most elaborate abstractions — even Jackson Pollock in his largest canvases — did not, I think, use up as much time as would an artist who was creating a comparable work in the more conventional manner. This greatly increases each artist's capacity to produce and thereby increases not only his competition with other artists but also his competition with himself.

And finally, abstraction encounters more competition from Nature itself.

For example, although landscapes are admittedly contending against resemblances and similarities which ordinary scenery sometimes supplies, you would have to travel quite a bit to find high likenesses to such landscapes as have been painted by Turner, Chirico, Bierstadt, the Douanier Rousseau, Böcklin, Ryder, Bingham or Brueghel.

In abstraction, on the contrary, every grain in wood (see Figure 28), every cloud formation, every absent-minded doodle, every pattern in marble, every cloth texture, wall-paper, accidental paint-splash, mud-puddle conformation, every haphazard blot, stain, tarnish, discoloration or surface smear (see Figure 30) is battling you, trying to make a banality out of the abstraction you have painted or are planning.

As a result, tiredness is working much harder (and more obviously) against you than in more conventional art. It is not merely standing warningly at your back (as it is in *all* art) but it is holding a dagger at your throat, ready to deal the death-blow instantaneously and without mercy.

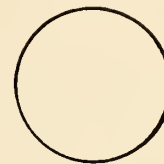


COMMON AMERICAN BARES

Figure 28

from Funk & Wagnall's Dictionary

In order to elucidate my point I shall imagine that for some personal reason of your own you desire to create — and *do* create — this art work.



It's an abstraction, because anything can be.

It has symmetry, rhythm, unity, significance and a number of other qualities which critics like to harp on as desirable.

Nevertheless, tiredness hesitates not an instant, but plunges the blade. You are aesthetically executed.

Why?

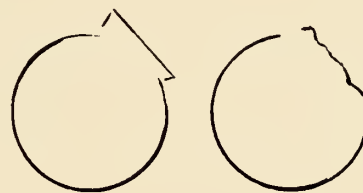
Because, you have created something — a perfect circle — which nearly every adult on earth is capable of creating. All he needs for the job is a pen and a compass.

However, let's not give up so quickly. Let's imagine that you try to defend yourself by saying that although it may be true that your creation is “only a perfect circle” you put *something special* into this particular circle, namely that it is supposed to be a symbol of (for instance) one-worldism.

Does this save your life? Not for a moment.

The symbol you pretend to have inserted exists only in your own mind. There is no reason why an observer should read it in *your* circle more than in any other circle.

Let's try again. This time you produce two other abstractions, thus



The first one more subtly suggests one-worldism (you claim) because it indicates the need for fabricating specific bonds in order to “complete” the circle; and the second one is truer (you claim) because it indicates that men are striving (and wavering) *towards* one-worldism but never quite reach it.

For the committing of these two art works your execution may, I concede, be slightly delayed, but not for long. The possibility that an observer might read into them the same mystic interpretations (or emotions) that you intended has perhaps been increased, but not nearly enough to win you a pardon.

Not only that, but even if the observer should actually read those same interpretations — and even if he should acknowledge that in creating

abstractions that instigated those interpretations you had done something worth doing — the fact still remains that most men (although not quite so many as in the case of the perfect circle) could create the art works (or at least 95 per cent resemblances to them) as “well” as you had.

And finally, no matter how great your success, you have after all, done nothing but implant in the observer a single extremely uncomplex idea — oneworldism — which idea, much as you might wish otherwise — inevitably declines (and *very rapidly*) into a mere cliché. Neither the idea itself, nor the manner of its creation, has enough resistance to reiteration to be more than a gag or stunt.

The mind can too easily take it in, too easily store it away and recreate it (from memory) with so close an approximation to the original that the actual original is rarely if ever needed.

And so on. From this elementary level abstractions can complexify themselves until they may attain as high, or nearly as high, a resistance to

reiteration as the “masterpieces” in other art modes. In fact the pioneers in the field — Kandinsky, Braque, Matisse, Tanguy, Gris, Feininger, Leger, O’Keeffe — usually operated at that level.

It is only recently, since abstractions achieved their present popular success (and staggering prices) that the purveyors of the mode, convinced that abstraction is the “ultimate” in art and warrants everything, have ventured into the lower level, have, as it were, stopped trying, and concluded that a few slashing strokes on a canvas, when the strokes were sufficiently “compelled” by some cryptic urge or occult fervor whirling inside their egos, were easily worth five, eight or ten thousand dollars.

Whether or not anybody else did (or conceivably could) read their mystic ideas mattered not. The ideas were there, just the same, exerting their “irresistible and eternal pull” on the observer.

With the regrettable, but very natural result, that the abstractions, even when the “ideas” supposedly



Figure 29 — Cultivate your Mysticism
Learn to find occult meanings in everything!

From the pictures shown here and on page 51, for example, you can read Collision of Yes with No; Frustration, as symbolized by a chicken aspiring to be an eagle; Compulsive State of Non-Freedom; Anti-Me; Symphony in H-Sharp; Open Window to IT and a score of others. Gradually you will learn to read conflicts, tensions, revolts and omens in almost any combination of lines and splotches. A good mystic can uncover something freudish anywhere, even when (as in Figure 30) the artist had no intention of putting it there. If a picture momentarily baffles you, merely say “it haunts me, I don’t know why”, or “it does something to me, I can’t say what”. After thus training yourself — and if you have enough money — you should soon find yourself in a living room containing as many hackneyed witticisms and worn-out wise-cracks — both verbal and pictorial — as does the room depicted above.

buried inside them got over, became that which their level of accomplishment caused them to become, namely gags, quips, epigrams, bon mots, exposés, capable of delivering quick, sharp and poignant blows and not much more. They became “exploits”, worthy of being given credit for what they accomplished, worthy, therefore, of brief mention in a history of art, but nothing more.

To describe them thus is not necessarily against them any more than it would be similarly to describe the maxim, “people who live in glass houses should not throw stones” or Douglas Jerrold’s witticism, “dogmatism is puppyism come to full growth.”

It is simply a recognition of the category of achievement in which they happen to belong. They are (or can be) *master strokes* (as in the above instances) which nobody but their clever authors could have invented. Their extremely low resistance to reiteration is not thereby concealed, however.

It would not be unfair to say, I think, that a large percentage of the extremist abstractions now very much in fashion have so low a resistance to reiteration that to frame and hang them in one’s home would be as irrational as to pay a similar tribute to a trenchant line you heard last night over television.

The interior illustrated in Figure 29 may suggest the effect. As to which, the abstractions or the witticisms, would sink the more rapidly into banality I will leave to your decision.

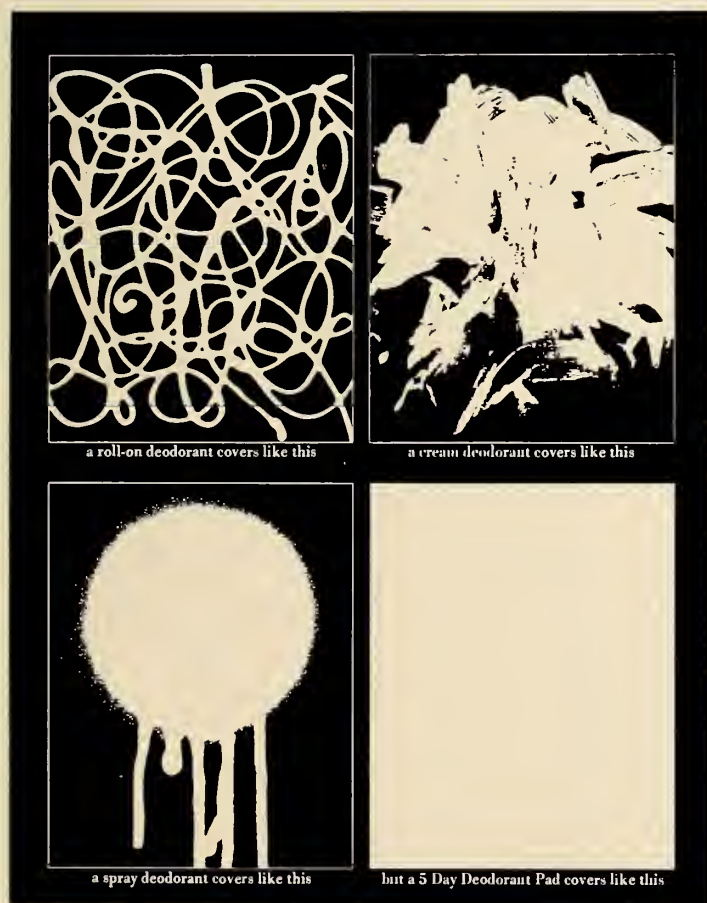


Figure 30

Shortly I will demonstrate — with actual examples — the depths of triviality to which such abstractions can descend. But before doing so I should like to single out the arch-villain who is responsible for the miscellaneous sophistries, hypocrisies, rant and turgidity now so prevalent in art criticism. It is Mysticism.

Mysticism is the bogey-man, ghoul, hoodoo by which the quack critic scares you off whenever he catches you beginning to see through him too clearly — especially whenever he sees you getting the notion that Fatigue has anything to do with art.

It manifests itself in numerous disguises. On one occasion it appears as Immortalism. On another it turns up as one-best-wayism — and endeavors to make you think that what we call “masterpieces” are perfection — that the slightest change would “ruin” them. Its switching power is fantastic.

As soon as you give countenance, however, to a supernatural being (or *deus ex machina*) like this, who can step out of the background at any instant and transform anything into its opposite, turn pomposity into profundity, frippery into sense, infatuation into intelligence, then all incentive to think, to analyze, to weigh the pros and cons, vanishes.

Now in case you have been wondering why I have gone so far as this without my usual denunciations and censures of the Metropolitan Museum it was because I was waiting for the proper time to do so — and this is it.

I’m not saying that the Museum has been guiltier than others in delivering occult baloney but only that the delivering of it by so important an institution has misled more people. The Metropolitan had a chance — with its nation-wide influence and range — to make an immense contribution to America’s understanding of art — had a chance to correct the fallacies, old wives’ tales and superstitions which had been handed down to us from the days when men believed in astrology, the evil eye and love philtres. Instead, it supports them, and drives them deeper into our minds.

I have shown you numerous cases of the Museum’s malpractices — the silly criterion (even one of the Museum’s own staff declined to support it)* by which a Renoir portrait was declared to be “superior” to an Ingres; the rigid dogmas of composition (e.g. the ruination of everything which would result if the model, in a Vermeer picture, turned her face to look out the window); the fanatical and partisan exalting of certain cave paintings into eternal masterpieces; and the rest.

They would be enough in themselves to substantiate my charges. Nevertheless I shall present you one more instance because it is particularly apropos to our present subject, Abstraction.

It concerns *The Studio* by Picasso (see Figure 32) which the Metropolitan compares with Vermeer’s *Artist in his Studio* (see Figure 31) in the following words:

“Many people have the uncomfortable feel-

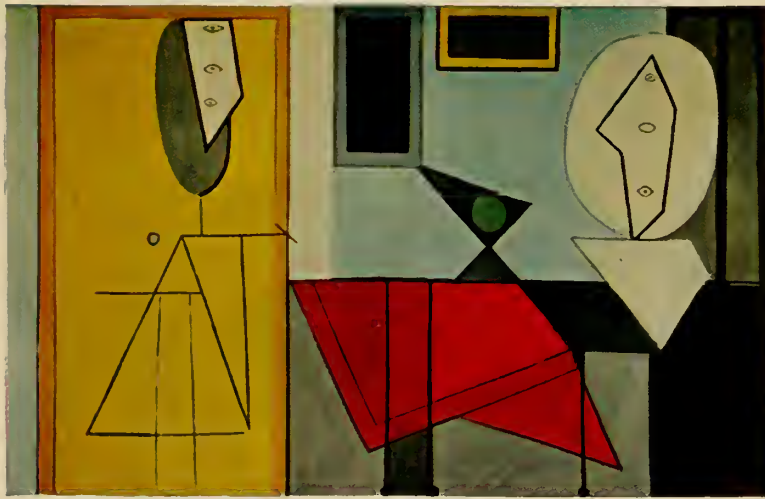
*See Appendix B

ing that modern abstract art is too easy because the painter is not obliged to demonstrate a high degree of craftsmanship. The Vermeer, considered as craftsmanship alone, remains a gem. Technically and in details it is an extremely complicated picture, but in this very complication there is a degree of safety that is denied to the abstract painter. The Picasso is so simplified that any faulty relationship would be more glaring than one in the Vermeer. A second-rate picture along the lines of the Vermeer is still an interesting picture, can even be a good one. A second-rate picture along the lines of the Picasso is simply no good at all.

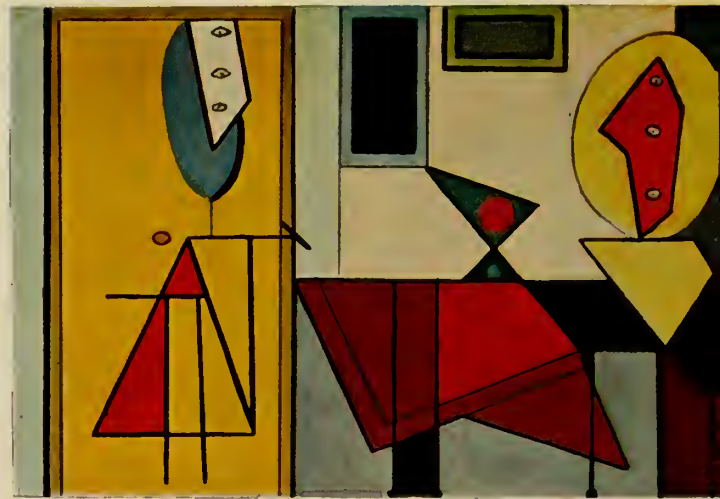
"By examining the structure of the Picasso we can discover, if we have not felt it from the first, that the picture is as tautly constructed as Vermeer's is exquisitely arranged. . . . The most obvious element tying the picture together is the repetition of strict verticals and horizontals. The line of the artist's 'neck,' if continued downward, meets the intersection of two other lines and forms one side of a suggested square. . . . A dozen similar relationships can be discovered; they form a kind of secondary, concealed but important, supporting structure. As in the Vermeer, every element in the Picasso affects every other one. The thumb hole of the palette, to take an



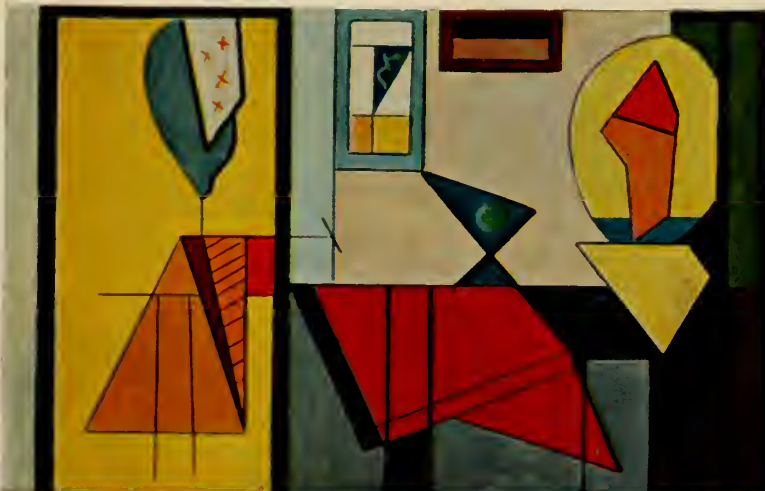
Figure 31, The Artist in His Studio, Vermeer



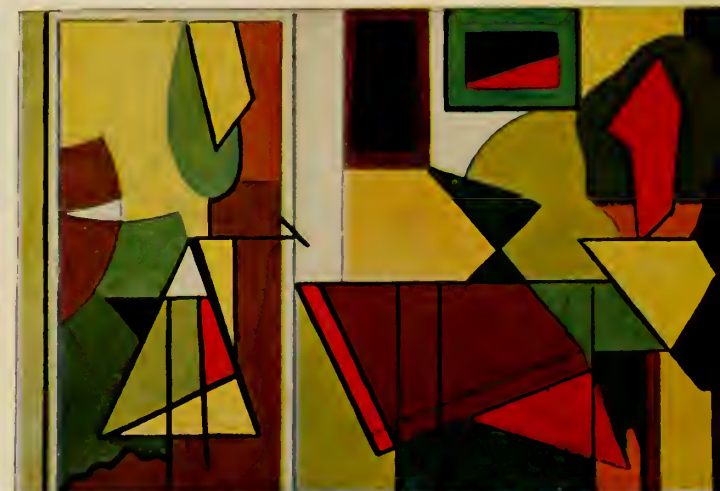
a



c



b



d

Figure 32, A, The Studio, by Picasso; B, C, and D, variants of same

example, at random, seems just the right size and in just the right spot; if it were made a brilliant color, this change would have to be compensated for by shifting its position or changing its size, or both."

First, you will notice that the Metropolitan mentions the lesser degree of craftsmanship (or drawing skill) in abstractionist painting—as I did. Which is very good. That which inevitably *follows* from that lesser degree of craftsmanship—its greater vulnerability to fatigue—however is *not* mentioned; although that is the essential factor.

What I propose to demonstrate to you now—despite the shrieks of rage and accusations of blasphemy which may result—is that the Picasso is not at a very high level among abstractions so far as resistance to reiteration is concerned. The mood of quippery is still very conspicuous in it—although decidedly in a lesser degree than in the quips which I have illustrated in Figure 29. I would compare it, for power to withstand fatigue with an Aesop fable (e.g. about sour grapes) or with Swift's (cannibalistic) *Modest Proposal* or De Maupassant's *The Necklace*, of which the "lessons" though clever and entertainingly delivered can quite easily be recreated thereafter from memory.

But it is by no means at the height of achievement of art works (such as *Embarkation for Cythera*, *Rheims Cathedral*, *Hamlet*, *Symphony Eroica*, or even most of Picasso's own paintings) which possess so rich and far-reaching a range of emotions (thereby rejecting the nomenclature of mere quips) that you can make only the remotest image of them in your own mind but must frequently return to the originals themselves for refreshment and verification.

Vermeer's *Artist in his Studio* is in this latter class. Picasso's *The Studio* isn't.

One reason for this is that the Picasso is an abstraction; and although an abstraction—as I have said—can attain a high resistance to reiteration, the very fact that it *is* an abstraction, from which the quality of drawing-skill has been largely removed, gives it a vulnerability to imitation which is exceedingly dangerous.

Another reason is that it is composed of flat (or unmerged) colors.

Any skilled technician could create a hundred close resemblances to the Picasso while he was creating only one to the Vermeer. A quick tracing of the lines and a filling in of colors would do it.

And there is still a third reason—which is revealed to the observer, peculiarly enough, by the very praise that the Metropolitan bestows on the picture—namely the series of "relationships," such as "the line of the artist's neck meeting the intersection of two other lines and forming one side of a suggested square" and so on. I doubt very much if Picasso, in creating these relationships, was being very serious about them or was trying very earnestly to create compositional miracles. On the contrary, he was indulging a caprice—getting fun out of a whim.

The tangency of the picture frames to the edge of the painting, the top of the "fruit bowl" running

up and landing so cutely on the corner of the frame, and so on, are only gags which fitted his mood of the moment.

Now you may tell me that this "interpretation" of mine is merely a guess. Perhaps; but I think it is a good one—and anyhow you may accept it or not—as you see fit.

This does not mean that Picasso did not use care and judgment as he worked on his composition. There were plenty of things he could have done which would have been obtrusively conspicuous and would have increased the picture's speed of tiring beyond the reasonable.

It may be true enough, as the Metropolitan alleges, that if the "thumb-hole" in the palette were made a brilliant color this change would have to be compensated for by shifting its position or changing its size or both. The fact that concentrating an excessive force on any minor point gives it an unpractically high speed of tiring hardly requires mentioning, however. It's like telling a famous violinist not to forget to put on his pants before going on stage. Although this omission might be amusing for a second or two, this would not make up for its power to distract the audience's attention from the rest of his performance.

In case the triviality of this simile offends you, I can only defend it on the ground of its emphasizing again that although no art work is necessarily and always bad it can sometimes (as can certain quips and abstractions) become bad so fast that it might as well be called "bad" right from the start.

And now let's revert to the sample of mysticism which I declared was to be found in the passage quoted from the Metropolitan's alleged "course of education in art appreciation." It is in these two sentences:

"A second-rate picture along the lines of the Vermeer is still an interesting picture, can even be a good one. A second-rate picture along the lines of the Picasso is simply no good at all."

It ought not to be—and I hope isn't—necessary for me to demonstrate how ridiculous is this Arabian-Nightsy and jinnee-created gap (very similar, by the way, to the gaps reported in Page 37) which has miraculously split open to separate the first rate from the second rate.

The only accounting for it that I can conceive is that the Metropolitan feels the need to throw in something unintelligible and daffy like this every little while in order to retain the mystic mood and keep you too much mixed up to do any rational thinking of your own.

However, ridiculous or not, let's check into it a bit.

On the opposite page I have shown a reproduction, A, of *The Studio* along with three "resemblances" to it, B, C, D.

The resemblances are not meant to be imitations but rather *variants* produced by other artists who desired to express the same idea as Picasso but in a manner which chanced to suit them better.

Now no matter how strongly you may despise these particular variants the fact remains that it would be possible to produce a hundred (or a thousand) similar ones, which when examined by

impartial critics (after tempers had cooled) would be judged as not "worse", and perhaps "better" than the Picasso. They might range progressively from minor changes in hue and composition, to more radical changes, but any attempt to confirm the existence of the Metropolitan's wide and completely uninhabited gap supposedly separating those which were as good as Picasso's and those which were "no good at all" would be so impossible that it would be difficult to find anybody sufficiently foolish to try it.

However it is not merely the fatuity of this, and other mysticisms which I desire to impress on you. It's more the fallacies, dementia and obsessions they spread abroad; *first*, among artists who are thereby persuaded to produce abstractions (and I am referring to the extremist, lower-level type of them) in the obvious belief that they are turning out art works which are vital and profound instead of merely temporary and occasionally useful witticisms, reminders and quips; and *second*, to art lovers who believe that in purchasing these "quips" (at exorbitant prices) they are placing themselves in art's avant garde, giving support to a "great endeavor" and decorating their walls with paintings which they will enjoy and be proud of for many years to come.

That mysticisms (including particularly the Metropolitan's contributions) have actually done this harm — at least to artists — is indicated, I believe, by the fervor with which the artists themselves indulge in similar mysticisms.

Here are a few samples*, all of them cited from the actual remarks of well-known artists in the field of abstract art.

"To paint is to participate in a poised absurdity. It is the taking of the hand of tenderness into the fearfulness of aspiration."

"Complete vision abandons the three-times-divided soul and its vapours; it is the cloud come over the inland sea. You can't interpret the dream of the canvas for this dream is at the end of the hunt on the heavenly mountain — where nothing remains but the phoenix caught in the midst of lovely blueness."

"Any conscious involvement is good if it permits the unknown to enter painting almost unnoticed. Then the painter must hold this strange thing, and sometimes he can, for his whole life has been a preparation for recognizing and resolving it."

"The function of the artist is to make actual the spiritual so that it is there to be possessed."

"Usually I am on a work for a long stretch, until a moment arrives when the air of the arbitrary vanishes and the paint falls into positions that feel destined . . . to paint is a possessing rather than a picturing."

And so on.

Now let me be very careful here. I am not accusing these artists (nor critics) of charlatanry. They may be expressing their own beliefs with the greatest sincerity and honesty. It must be admitted, however, that the language they employ in expres-

sing those beliefs has a very recognizable flavor — namely the flavor of ambiguity and necromancy which has been employed by charlatans for centuries, from Cagliostro to Tartuffe.

Nor am I asserting that mysticism (and let's assume that it is the *sincere* kind of mysticism) necessarily and always is harmful. *Any* pursuit of the will-o-the-wisp — any slogging through aesthetic bogs under the pull of a "vision" — can be productive of something new and interesting.

The danger comes from the belief (and this belief seems to be bound into most of the opinions I have quoted) that in the artists' finding of this "something new and interesting" they have attained a goal, have discovered the long-hidden formula for great art and that now everybody is going to know just how to paint in the future.

Let's admit that it is extremely *human* to indulge in these romanticisms but let's also admit that it is not very sagacious. And neither is it as indicative of an exceptional imaginative power as it might seem — and for the very natural reason that it is extremely easy to do. Psychic mummeries, loony symbolisms, apocalyptic vaporings can be turned out wholesale by anybody who wants to take the bother.

A wide assortment of individuals — young or old — can apply a few random brush strokes to a canvas, draw into those strokes the feeling that they are "being possessed by something"; the feeling that "the unknown is entering unnoticed"; "that they are taking the hand of tenderness into the fearfulness of aspiration", and so on; and they can, having attained these initial feelings, persuade themselves that the applying of additional brush strokes constitutes a development and amplification of those feelings. As I said, anybody can do it.

What counts is not the particular emotion which is burning inside the painter — and which he is presumably trying to convey to somebody else — but whether or not he actually conveys it (or ever will); and whether or not the conveying of it is merely the conveying of what is already a banality or of what will develop into a banality (as a clever quip does) after the barest glance.

Or if you wish to maintain that even if the painter fails to convey his own individual mood to anybody else it is the fact that he was *in that mood* which produced the painting and which instigated in the observer the particular assortment of sensations he felt, you are then asserting either that a certain Mood L necessarily produces a certain completely unrelated Mood R (which is infinitely improbable) or else you are asserting that a moody painter naturally paints moody pictures which is neither surprising nor important.

No matter how you look at it, an artist's inner seethings while painting his picture must somehow communicate, directly or indirectly, now or later, to an observer. Otherwise they have no more importance (except to his psychiatrist) than the fact that the picture was done on a rainy Tuesday, or while creditors were beating on his door or after a quarrel with his best girl.

It is because artists, critics and men in general (encouraged regrettably by the Metropolitan Museum) refuse to consider these actualities that such an enormous quantity of low-level (or merely quip-

*Most of them are taken from brochures published by the Museum of Modern Art (New York) in connection with travelling exhibits (to Europe and elsewhere) organized by the Museum.

py) abstractions, have been flooding in on us, lately.

Perhaps I can best bring out my point by presenting you the series of twelve paintings shown below. I am going to ask you to grant that one of these paintings (take your choice) was fervently praised by an influential critic as possessing "magnetic tension" or "heedless momentum", or as being an "intensification of experience" and was recently bought for, say \$5,000.

And I assure you that such an assumption is not at all unreasonable either in regard to extravagance of praise or of price — as a perusal of the art news in contemporary journals will prove to you.

And then I am going to ask you to imagine (and it shouldn't be difficult) that a certain group of one thousand young artists (who would find \$5,000 a welcome addition to their incomes) decide to devote one entire week to producing abstractions at the rate of ten per day (and they could easily do it) as much as possible in the same style as the picture which brought \$5,000.



The result would be 70,000 pictures possessing about the same resemblance to the \$5,000 picture, I believe, as do the eleven *other* pictures which I have shown on the same page with it, as below.

On the basis of these suppositions let me say what I believe the result would be — and I hope you will agree that it is logical.

I think that the critic who originally praised the "special" picture would find it extremely difficult — perhaps even impossible (unless he had anticipated

some such plot to deceive him) to pick it out again from the rest; I think that if a jury of ten critics were asked to choose the "best" picture out of the 70,000 no two of them would select the same one (the mathematical chances against it being too great)*; and that all ten of the critics would end up in a state of exhaustion and disgust which would radically change (and for the better) everything they had to say about art in the future. And I mean not because the pictures were "bad" but because you can't stand up forever against an exuberance of any one kind of "goodness", no matter how "good" it is supposed to be in the beginning.

Now how could I be wrong? By what assumption could these rather sarcastic comments of mine be unfair and deceptive — as most critics would say they were — rather than true and revealing — as I declare them to be?

Only by introducing Mysticism into art — only by acknowledging that some transcendent and eternally unanalyzable quality exists — let's call it *x*-ness — which infallibly differentiates the "good" from the mediocre, which would tell you unerringly, for example, whether configuration  was better or worse than configuration ; and — most preposterous of all — would be completely impervious to fatigue.

(Continued on page 54)

*and the supposedly infallible "test of time" a hundred years later would do no better.



Abstractions by the Million!

"Look, this is an easy painting to do. I'll bet I could paint seven of them a day. You just take a wide brush and go like this and that."

Such was the comment on one of his own paintings made by Mark Tobey (known as "the oldest living prophet of Abstract Expressionism") as quoted in *Time*. The above paintings are not his, but they are in a style (very popular just now) to which his remark is equally applicable. Say what you will, soar off into mysticism as far as you like, you can't read "timeless beauty" — nor justify high prices — in art works can be turned out on an assembly line, as it were. Men are not constituted to withstand such profusion.

Scale of Prices

Based Strictly on Probabilities of Imparting Visual Enjoyment

1. Black and White "Quips" (as represented on page 51) \$8.95 each

Inasmuch as I have rather fully discussed pictures of this type in my main text I will merely assert here that in the inducing of a customer to pay three, five or ten thousand dollars for the conglomeration of semi-random jabs and smooches which characterize most of these pictures mysticism is contributing a good 98 per cent of the push. The unfortunate purchaser is swirling dizzily in a cerebral coma wherein his only participation consists in trying to make sure that his complete blindness to all the mystic meanings being pointed out to him shall not show.

\$8.95 is too much to ask for these paintings but the high cost of canvas and paint forbids a reduction.

2. Color "Perfections" (similar to Example E on opposite page) \$12.50 each.

I have seen a hundred versions of this "formula of perfection", created carefully (and no doubt lovingly) by artists who are apparently convinced that their little combinations of colored stripes or rectangles are a miracle of harmony which will never grow stale.

The Metropolitan Museum has a number of them on display, and New York's Museum of Modern Art included several exemplars of this style in the exhibition — ambitiously captioned, *The New American Art* — which it recently circulated through eight European countries.

Possibly an analogy in the field of literature would more accurately express our opinion of such pictures than any adjectives no matter how pregnant.

Imagine purchasing a book entitled *America's Ten Best Short Stories* and discovering, on taking it home, that each story consisted of a single sentence.

One of them, we will say was: *Henry caught his black cat*. Let's concede that it's possible to conjure up a wide assortment of subtle excogitations and freudian moonings from these few words. Nevertheless I feel certain that you would not merely demand your \$3.50 back from the dealer who sold you the book, but also express an extremely low opinion of the publisher who was responsible for its issuance. Perhaps this will give you an idea of the tragic disillusion which may one day face the unfortunate dupe who shelled out \$3,500 for one of these "color-perfections" in the naive conviction that it represented the triumph (at last) of "absolute beauty" over tiredness.

Actually, the thinking up of a catchy design — (out of the millions available) — for a picture like this takes from three to twelve minutes. However, transferring it to canvas, cleaning up the brushes afterwards and so on, can easily consume an hour or two. Hence the high price.

3. Neo-Mondrians, (similar to examples F, G and H) \$67.00 to \$300.00.

Mr. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. states* that one of Mondrian's compositions "which seems so simple took weeks to paint; for each rectangle is a different size, each black line a different thickness, and the whole is put together and adjusted to hair's breadth with the conscience and precision of an expert engineer — though with this fundamental difference: that the engineer works for practical results, Mondrian for

artistic results — which in his case might be called the image of perfection."

What Mr. Barr says may be true enough, but do not let it mislead you. Paintings in this style require only slightly more time than in the two styles previously discussed. Mondrian's slowness in getting what he wanted resulted simply from his trying to be guided by an abstract theory of beauty instead of by his eye. The procedure would be comparable to a man's consulting a book on astronomy to find out where the sun ought to be at the moment instead of glancing skywards and taking a look.

This, of course, brings in mysticism again; and although it is not so influential as in our previously discussed styles it has enough force to boost the valuation of Mondrian's pictures way higher than where they belong from a purely aesthetic viewpoint.

Pictures indistinguishable from his, except for the absence of his signature, can be produced by the thousand. To pretend otherwise is mere self delusion.

4. Pollockiana (see Examples I and J, "Calm" and "Gale") \$100.00 to \$800.00 according to size.

Here we have quite a step in advance in difficulty of doing, and, consequently, a decidedly less dependence on mysticism. So if you are extremely positive in asserting your preference to Pollock's own creations over ours I will not combat your adverse verdict too strenuously. There is a scope for variations of opinion here, from a completely realistic and un-mystic point of view, which is absent in our previous categories. And yet I will assert that from a practical angle the current prices for Pollock pictures — around \$50,000 — are ridiculous. In fact, if you are planning to purchase a Pollock at this figure I suggest that you let us know and we will be glad to get you a better picture for only \$5,000. Our procedure will be to scout around amongst capable artists of our acquaintance and persuade ten of them for \$500 each (and it won't be difficult) to turn out the best "Pollock" they know how. I am certain that at least one of the ten pictures would please you (and any fair-minded "expert" you might choose,) as well as the original Pollock whose purchase you were contemplating: thus not only saving you a total of \$45,000 but giving you possession of nine extra pictures which, even if slightly inferior would be worth keeping or giving away as presents to your friends.

Possibly you may call my attention here to the fact that if shenanigans of this sort are effective with pictures by Pollock there is no reason why they should not be similarly effective with Rembrandts, Vermeers and Durers. Yes, they *would* be effective but much less so. All pictures — even the great masterpieces of traditional art — are vulnerable to fatigue (and excessive reiteration) as I have said. It is simply that that fatigue is more difficult to induce and less likely to happen.

Or to express it differently, shenanigans like this are continuously in operation, today and every day, even if behind the scenes; pushing this art work up, the next one down; driving one painting into oblivion, drawing another out of it.

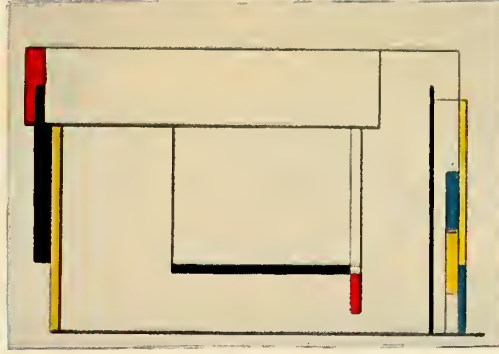
5. Fun with Colors and Shapes (similar to examples K, L, M, N, O and P) \$100.00 to \$1,000.00.

Mysticism can be only a minor factor in such art works; but so long as the colors in them are flat and unblended (with the resulting limitations to their complexities and difficulties of doing) the prices quoted above are not unreasonable. The paintings are too vulnerable to imitation to be worth more — so far as eye-pleasure is concerned.

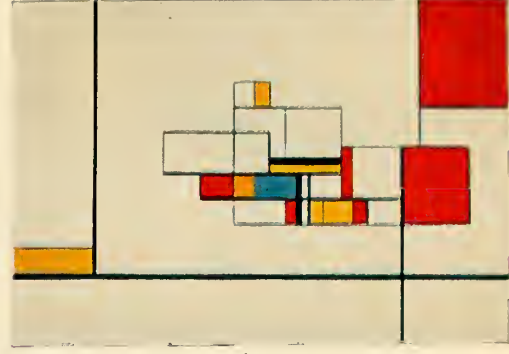
*In *What is Modern Painting*, published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



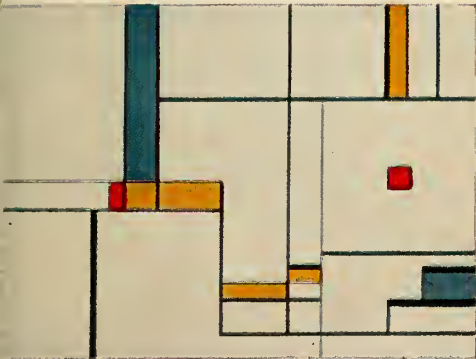
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i



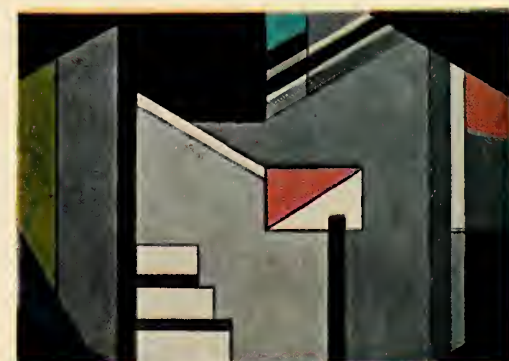
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Mysticism's Influence in Evaluating Art Works

The present market price of many paintings depends largely on how successful art critics and art dealers have been in "teaching" the buying public that there is some mystic and forever unknowable force which decides the "eternal value" of those paintings. For a more realistic point of view, see opposite page.

(Continued from page 51)

The \$5,000 picture, you would have to make yourself think, possesses this magic x-ness and not a single one of the others does, in any degree.

And furthermore the presence of this x-ness in the \$5,000 picture (or its absence in the rest) must be so forceful, must stick out so strongly, must hit you so hard that no matter how protractedly you were subjected — even harassed, frazzled and tortured — by the 70,000 pictures you could still turn to the \$5,000 picture, see it as something entirely new and different and just love every minute of looking at it.

The fatigue which had been built up in your nerve system by the 70,000 pictures would (in theory) be a complete irrelevance; in the way that the fatigue built up by sitting in a hard chair and watching a long, dull movie would be an irrelevance (and in fact would entirely vanish) if you should be transplanted into a hammock, be handed your favorite beverage and have your weary brow and aching neck-muscles massaged by an attractive member of the opposite sex.

The trouble is, of course, that it can't be done. X-ness, even if it exists outside the mentality of those who pretend to feel it (and I don't think it does) can't be this omnipotent cure-all. It can't reign isolatedly in an ethereal zone into which you can carry your assorted wearinesses and have them instantaneously relieved, no matter what their nature. A remote approximation to x-ness may temporarily exist in providential accidents (e.g. hitting oil, winning the sweep-stakes) or in attaining the previously inaccessible, or accomplishing the difficult to do and so on. But it's just a run of good luck — and surfeit kills it, sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly.

What you have to realize is that certain sensations are firmly tied into each other by resemblances. Others are less firmly attached. Still others (as exemplified by the hard chair versus hammock simile) have a low resemblance and therefore are reliefs to each other, and until you recognize this fact, until you try to analyze and classify resemblances (both as to degree and type) according to whether they are accentuating or relieving fatigues (and how much and how fast) you are working at the kindergarten level of art criticism.

Or if you want to meet this point by reducing the amount of "supernaturalism" in x-ness — by maintaining, for example, that you mean only that the \$5,000 picture possesses *more* of this merely useful (and not supernatural) x-ness than the rest, you are no better off. You simply finish up with one picture worth \$5,000, ten thousand pictures worth \$4,000 each, eight thousand worth \$3,000 each* and so on up to a valuation for all the 70,000 pictures together running up close to the billions — and besides that, you finish up with the artists who created the pictures averaging perhaps \$10,000 apiece for their week's labor. Which of course is a

reductio ad absurdum, reached through another door. Surfeit and excess are taking charge again.

And in conclusion, let's examine the situation (or more accurately "sorry plight") in which the unfortunate owner of the \$5,000 abstraction finds himself.

As he sees younger artists — hundreds of them — striving desperately to get a foothold in the rich market which has developed for abstractions and producing pictures — thousands of them — with a skill (let's not pretend otherwise) and in a volume that will make Chrysler, Ford and General Motors look on with envy, an awful queasiness will invade his vitals. As the tidal wave of abstraction (and that is what it's getting to be) veers dangerously close in style to his own picture not only will its attraction to him sharply decline — but so will its financial worth.

And then at last the dread day arrives. On a chance visit to the dealer from whom he originally bought his picture, he is confronted with a picture which is almost a duplicate of his own — *and it is offered for sale at only \$175.*

For illustration, let's imagine that his \$5,000 picture is Number 7 in the series shown on page 51 and that the \$175 picture is Number 11 in the same series.

By what mental acrobatics can he make himself think that the sixteenth of an inch difference in the width of a brush stroke or a two-degree variation in the slant of a line (thus supposedly changing the picture's "rhythm" or "spacial relationship") are sufficient to account for the \$4,825 difference in price.

Can he account for it by assuring himself that his picture is genuinely "an intimate chat with the divinity" (such being possibly a phrase used by a critic in describing it) and the other picture isn't? I doubt it.

However let's not grieve too long about the poor fellow's tragedy.

Let's simply remind ourselves — whenever we are thinking of purchasing an abstractionist painting (or *any* painting) at a high price — of this indubitable fact: that if a picture is easy to paint, if it can be painted rapidly and if there is a strong inducement of price for artists to paint that sort of picture it won't be long before there are so many such pictures around, (and so closely resembling each other) that their values, both in money and for visual enjoyment, will have sunk very low indeed. No amount of psychic interpretations or occult blurbs supposedly demonstrating their superiority can for very long prevent this collapse.

Stop Deceiving Yourself

As soon as you deny the force of Fatigue in art you are out of education (and out of your mind) and into mysticism.

Thereafter the opinions you express are based not on rational thinking but on whatever cute little whimsy or pipe-dream (see samples in Chapter XIV) happens to be your favorite at the moment.

*or if you maintain that the 10,000 second-rate and 8,000 third-rate pictures are worth only \$50 and \$40 each, then you are back in the previously-discussed alternative according to which the \$5,000 picture is a miracle and all the rest of the pictures don't resemble it at all and are nothing.

In order to demonstrate to you as convincingly as possible the truth of this statement we show you a group of paintings (p. 53) which, besides being reasonably representative of certain abstractionist styles especially popular just now, will also serve as examples of these varying degrees of dependency on mysticism. And then we have priced them at what we consider they would legitimately be worth after taking into account the skill and time required to produce them and after leaving *out* of account all so called "absolute" or mystic values — after disregarding, that is, all clairvoyant hunches, all frenzied pretences that certain artists had discovered (finally) — and infused into their pictures — that long-sought miracle-quality which would stand up eternally against fatigue no matter how long and how frequently the observer were subjected to perception of those pictures.

And, of course, snob-value and collecting-value are also completely left out of account. Eye-pleasure is the sole criterion.

In some cases — that is, in abstractionist painting of what I have called the "gag" or "occult meaning" type — their value — both monetary and emotional — drops almost to nothing.

Now before you decide heatedly that this "demonstration" is senseless because our paintings are so hopelessly inferior let us merely assert resolutely that we don't consider them so. To us they compare very favorably with similar works currently on view in reputable galleries — even in some museums.

Miseducation by Purchase

Having previously stated that the Metropolitan Museum's purchases of art works are — and must always be — eighty per cent guess-work and only twenty per cent judgment, I am hardly in a position to find fault with what they have bought.

There are a few of the Museum's "mistakes", however, of which I must make mention because they show how the Metropolitan can miseducate by its purchases as harmfully as it has miseducated by the publication of its *Seminars in Art*.

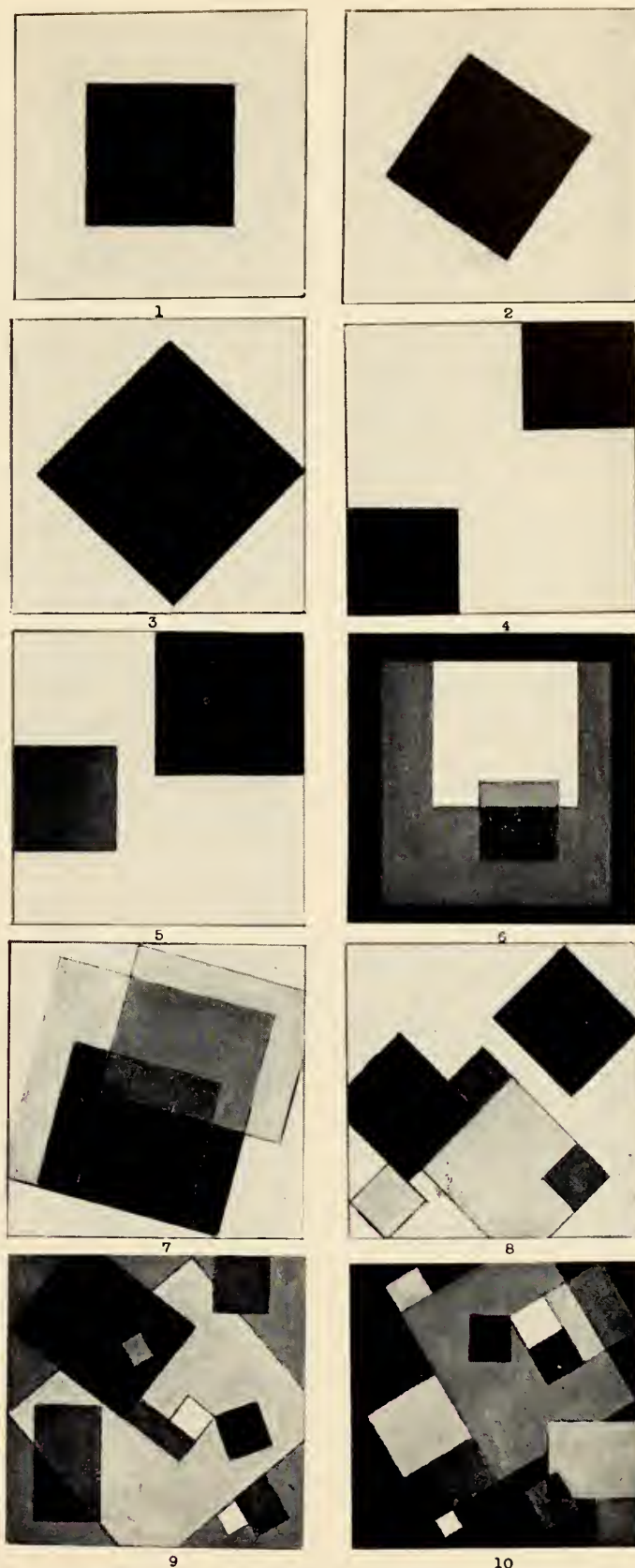
To illustrate my point let me present for your observation the series of ten abstractions shown at right.

No. 1 in this series is especially important, I believe, because it is what might be called a *basic art work*. I call it that because I think it is clear that there is no way to make an appraisal of it except on the basis of Fatigue. All you can say about it is that there isn't enough *to* it, and consequently, that *it tires too fast*.

To condemn it as "ugly" won't do because (and I believe you must agree) nobody can paint a black square that is either more beautiful (or uglier) than this one.

And if you endeavor to confute me by charging that this "picture" *isn't art* let me assure you firmly that it *is* art. All that differentiates it from other pictures is that it carries you further down than they do to the *raw elements* of art.

(Continued on page 58)



Abstractions in a Descending Scale of Tiring-Speed



Hold Your Freedom of Choice; Every Day is Different

Here are five "versions" of the same painting. They differ from each other somewhat as five renditions of a certain symphony, under the batons of five conductors, might differ from each other. If — in a moment of weakness — you allow critics to persuade you (and they will try very hard to do so) that any one of them is necessarily "the best", you are, in effect, forever excommunicating the other four. Under no circumstances could you conceivably desire to have perception of them so long as the supposedly "best one" was available — otherwise it could, of course, hardly be called "the best". Even a temporary preference for one of the four would brand you as an ignoramus — at least during that temporary preference.

Here is how the general idea is expressed by Helen Huss Parkhurst, in her book, *Beauty*.

"The experiencing of many . . . things should be indulged (only) at auspicious moments. . . . The moon ought never to be looked upon when the sky is altogether empty of clouds. Certain glades in the forest should be visited only when the light is slanting — in early morning or late afternoon. . . . Cypressess, poplars, cedars and pines ought to be viewed in silhouette against the sky; and the oak when its magnificent skeleton is bare."

May I assure you that in the moment you accept verdicts of this sort you are frustrating yourself. Imagine, for example, a world in which the moon was visible only when clouds were in the sky, and where forests could be visited only when the light was slanting etc.; and then imagine the relief of visiting another world in which these restrictions were removed and you could indulge in such experiences on whatever occasions you desired — whether they were the "auspicious" ones or not. And the same factors must be taken into account no matter how transcendental may be the art work you are endeavoring to evaluate.

Let me urge you not to excuse opinions such as the one I just quoted you as permissible "flights of fancy". They are not that at all. Each one is a bait, a decoy, to lure you deeper into a Zombieland where you have ceased to be a rational being.

Critics are out to cheat you. It's part of their business, as is openly admitted by George Jean Nathan (see page 26) and also in a remark which Deems Taylor (in his book, *Music To My Ears*) quotes from a letter written to him by the famous critic, Lawrence Gilman, as follows: —

"I think that a critic can usually learn more from a composer than the composer can learn from the critic. All this, of course, is a violation of the rules of the guild, which insists, as you know, upon infallibility. But then, we all know that that is nonsense."

That's their business, and it's your business to see that they don't succeed.

Here are a couple of samples on which you can exercise your capacity for *not being taken in*.

"Logically, therefore, a critic who repudiated valuation from criticism would be debarrd from excluding



any artefact from the scope of his research and would be bound to devote himself equally and impartially to shipping invoices and sonnets to cathedrals and jakes, to the pictures in the National Galleries and the representation of 'wanted' criminals in the police stations."

Harold Osborne, *Aesthetics and Criticism*.

To open so illogical a statement with the word "logically" should not surprise you in critics. It's typical. Actually there are a score of reasons for preferring invoices and jakes, including their greater rarity, their greater complexity and the greater intelligence needed in producing them.

How many seconds of careful thought did Mr. Osborne devote to this statement of his, either before or after he put it into print? Probably none at all. He merely took for granted the public's complete gullibility.

And the second one:

"I know of no refutation of this claim [that art has no infallible standards] except to point out that it is tantamount to utter nihilism, that is, to a situation in which any value judgment is as cogent as any other. Nihilism in aesthetics . . . is irrefutable but totally unacceptable to the demands of human experience." Morris Weitz, *Philosophy of the Arts*.

Don't let it bluff you. Nihilism doesn't inevitably follow from a lack of infallible standards. Man merely learns to operate on *probabilities* (as in the science of meteorology) instead of *certainities*, which as I shall explain later, is a decidedly more satisfying foundation.

(Continued from page 55)

And if it were not true that our Picture #1 is art you would be required, first, to deny that Picture #10, in the same series, was art; and if you were unable to do so (and I'm sure you couldn't, unless you wish to deny that *any* abstraction can be art) you would then be required to draw a line somewhere in this series of pictures and declare that art suddenly (and inexplicably) started exactly there and nowhere else. Which I think you will admit is equally impossible.

Now what we obviously have done here is present to you a sequence of abstractionist art works, featuring squares, (from 1 to 10) wherein, by our best estimate, there is a *constantly decreasing* speed of tiring.

In #1 that speed, as I have said, is so high that there is no scope for talking about anything else except that speed. To say that it was a black square, centrally placed inside a white square possessing twice its lateral dimensions, exhausts the subject.

Continuing beyond #1 there is, as you will see, a progressively greater opportunity for description.

Picture #2 is the same square still centrally placed but given an oblique twist.

In #3 the black square is larger, no longer has an obvious size-relation to the enclosing square, is not centrally located, is differently twisted and is tangent at one corner with the edge of the painting.

#4 adds the additional complication of a third square — the two interior ones being of the same size and placed at opposite corners of the large square.

#5 gives different sizes to the two interior squares, places one square in a corner, the other along one side, and, more important, brings in the tone of grey besides the original black and white.

And so on. Overlappings are introduced. More variants of grey are employed. Squares are no longer exactly square, are given a wide variety of tilts and tangencies and are even imagined as extending beyond the boundaries of the picture.

With the result that more and more words are required to give a fair description of the "pictures", until for the last one, a great many pages would be necessary to make clear all the compositional involvements.

This does not mean that no other factors except the number of words required for description are influential in deciding how great may be an art work's speed of tiring. Intensities of contrast and other obtrusivenesses are also at work tiring the eye or brain. Nevertheless, the more things there are in a painting that you can observe and think about the more its resistance to reiteration is likely to be.*

In which connection I should like to quote a very keen remark* by Critic Robert Goldwater — and very much in contrast to what critics usually say:

One of the prime functions of the critic is simply to serve as a method whereby the observer is arrested by a work of art for a longer time than, were he unaided, that work of art could hold his attention.

Having reached this point, there are a few conclusions that we may draw. First, that the less the speed of tiring, the greater the number of pictures producible at that level. For instance, at the level of speed of tiring represented by #1 it would be hard to invent many other combinations of squares possessing that same high speed of tiring (and equal simplicity of describing). At the level of #5 decidedly more combinations would be available and at the level of #10 (although it might be hard to think them up) a practically infinite number would be available.

Second, *and most important*, if Fatigue (as represented here by Speed of Tiring) is the prime and only factor in appraising the merit of these abstractionist art works it is hardly believable that it ceases to be that prime and only factor in appraising the merit of art works in other fields. The basic forces are just as certainly operative there as in abstraction. It is merely that they are less easily recognizable by the eye.

Critics (with the possible exception of Mr. Goldwater) would, of course, angrily deny all this. To concede the existence of Fatigue makes nonsense of all their appraisals because the alleged standards on which their appraisals have always been based — rhythm, unity, balance, harmony and the rest — are manifestly as vulnerable to fatigue as any other quality. There is no kind of rhythm, no degree of unity, no flavor of balance or of harmony of which it is impossible to obtain too much and there is consequently no formula of unrhythm, disunity, unbalance or disharmony which could not conceivably be beautiful.

As I have said, critics don't know how to talk in the realistic language which Fatigue imposes.

The following paragraph from *Time* (July 4, 1960) illustrates the panic into which they are thrown when faced with an exhibition of abstractionist art works which I presume, for a guess, to be at about the level — on the basis of speed of tiring — as are Abstractions 3 to 8 in our series.**

The tidal bore of abstract art flows so overpoweringly these days that most critics find it profitless trying to swim against the current. But last week at the 30th Venice Biennale, 400 painters and sculptors from 33 nations exhibi-

*Quoted in *Modern Artists in America*, edited by Robert Motherwell.

**One of the pictures, says the article, "consists only of a black curved strip over a small yellow square against a dull, grey-brown background."

*But, as I shall explain later, a reverse movement eventually develops. The introduction of more and more complications begins to increase (rather than decrease) the speed of tiring, and the pictures become more and more describable by the one word *chaos*.

ted some 3,000 works whose overall impression was so weird that the experts, almost to a man, rose in revolt. "It is not the world of art," said Turin's outraged *La Stampa*, "but a world of impenetrable moors and silent, sterile landscapes." Added respected Critic Leonardo Borghese, writing in Milan's *Corriere della Sera*: "Ridiculous, sad, terrible. So abstract are all these works that they are beyond critical judgment."

The audacity of it all dumfounds the poor fellows. Their customary clichés, platitudes, and turgidities don't fit any more. Nothing remains to be said.

And yet how easy it really is. The pictures are not "beyond critical judgment" as Signor Borghese laments. It is merely that the factor of Fatigue has pushed itself so conspicuously into the front that it can no longer be ignored, and rather than admit its existence — rather than come out and say frankly *these pictures tire too fast* — the critics prefer to take refuge in irrelevant scoldings.

Later I shall discuss more fully that extremely important (but now ignored) factor of art criticism — *speed of tiring*. As a preliminary exercise, however, you may care to study the five variants of a picture (shown on pages 56-7) and endeavor to estimate the differences in their tiring speeds, independently of their initial attraction.

I selected this particular picture for the experiment, because its subject, *Too Small A World*, suggests man's unending need for broadening his own horizon, in contrast to the effort by art critics to imprison him inside a barrier of immortalisms, perfections and one-best-wayisms.

This brings us to the previously mentioned paintings which I believe the Metropolitan Museum should have known were not suitable for purchase.

There are quite a few of them, but as the general reprobatations apply to them all I shall confine myself to a single one — Josef Albers' *Homage to the Square* (in black and white) now conspicuously on display in the Museum's department of Contemporary American Art.

No one of the reproductions (on next page) exactly represents Mr. Albers' painting, but the third one is as close a resemblance as we could achieve.

I have selected Mr. Albers' picture because — if we assume the ten pictures on page 50 to be a development of the general idea *Homage to the Square* — his picture, to our way of thinking, can quite easily be assigned a position in that series — can quite easily be assigned, that is, a speed of tiring in relation to the other pictures in the same series. To estimate it as possessing approximately the high speed of tiring of our *Homages* #5, #6 or #7 (that is, about twenty per cent less speed of tiring than a blank canvas would have) and as possessing a decidedly higher speed of tiring than that of our "Homages" #9 and #10, would not seem unfair.

Which obviously raises the question of how much resistance to reiteration a painting should be required to have to justify its being considered for

purchase by the Metropolitan. I will not venture to answer that question beyond expressing the opinion that Mr. Albers' picture has not nearly that requisite amount. It is far too easily read and memorized.

However, lest you begin to worry over the excessive sum (that is, anything over \$50) which the Museum presumably paid for the picture, let me insist that the waste of money is of minor importance.

Much more regrettable is the fact that the picture's presence on the Museum's walls miseducates all those who see it there — causes them to believe that there is one particular way of painting squares — one particular relation between the margin-widths around the squares, one particular relation between blacks, greys and whites — which is terrific, overwhelming, stupendous and beyond the capacity of any other artist even to approximate — and thereby infects them with the deadly germ of mysticism, to mislead and confuse them, perhaps for life.

Among the most pathetic sights you can encounter is that of culturally-eager "art lovers" (young and old) clustered in front of such paintings trying to coerce their minds into seeing the supernatural "values" which critics (and the Museum, by implication) have told them are therein to be found as soon as they have sufficiently cultivated their "tastes".

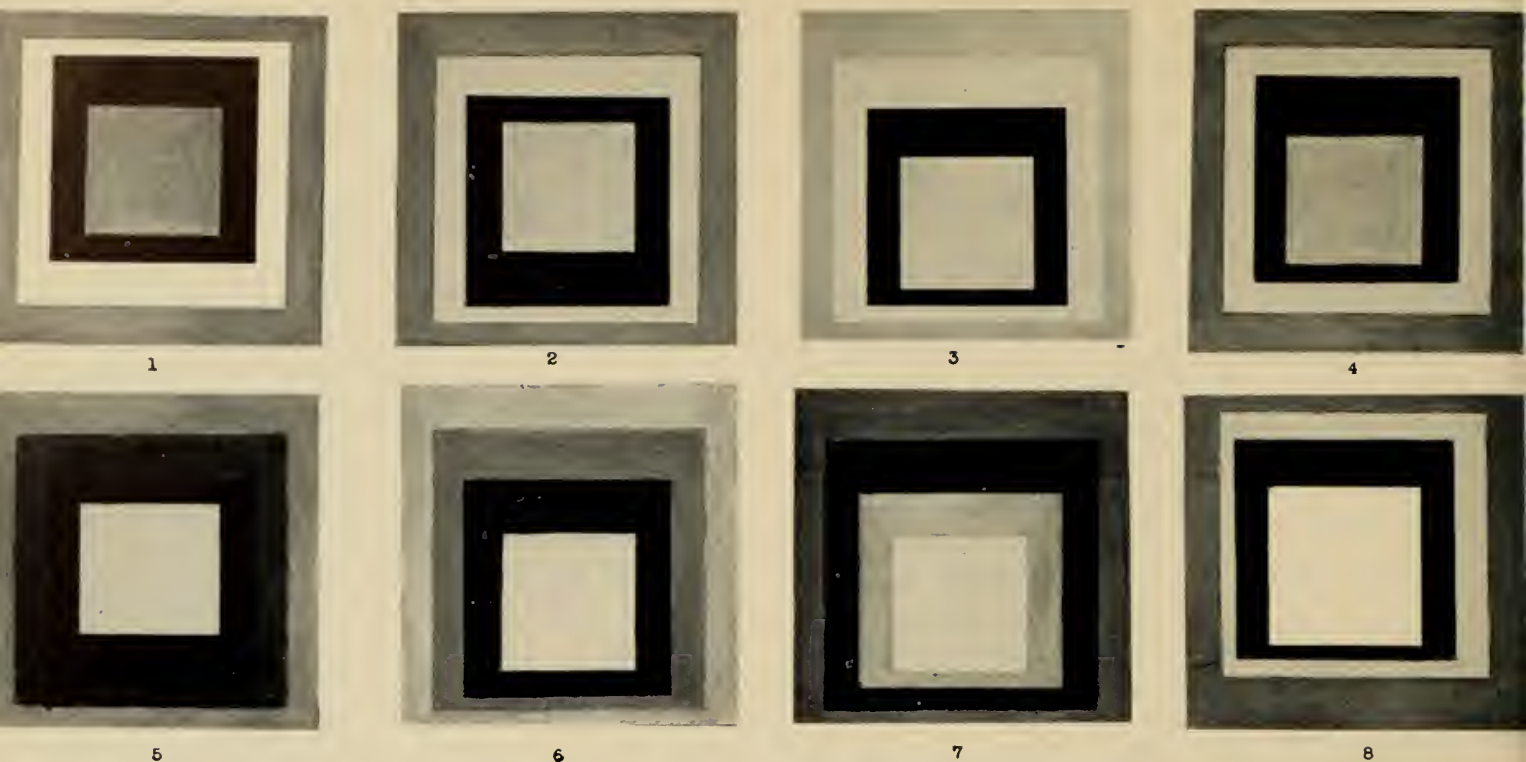
If such values really existed, then there would necessarily be a single one among the pictures here shown — (presumably the third one, since it is most like Mr. Albers' picture) which would stand out from the rest like a god among mortals, and would be completely unaffected by the fact that the other pictures — except for minor differentiations — were practically hundred per cent duplications of it, in emotional impact.

It's as ridiculous (almost) as if a pianist should charge ten dollars a ticket for audiences to come and hear him strike the chord CEG on his piano. No matter how fervently he rolls his eyes or undulates his body while doing so the result would still be CEG, and nothing else but. No mystic priggeries can alter that fact.

Now before you remind us that the analogy is not parallel, let's concede that it isn't. A few more variations are available in painting a square or two on top of another square than in striking a simple chord, but not nearly enough (especially when so rigidly arranged as Mr. Albers') to offset the overwhelming fact that they are all fundamentally the same thing.

By what process of reasoning the Metropolitan was induced to purchase Mr. Albers' picture is hard to say, but a clue may be drawn from the following interview given by one of its curators and reported in *Time* for April 11, 1960.

Hale (Robert Beverly) grew up in Manhattan, studied at Columbia, the Sorbonne and Manhattan's Art Students League. "I really learned drawing at the League," he says gently, smiling from the corner of his Raymond Massey mouth. "You learn something when you are with it more than eight hours a day."



Which is the Eternal Masterpiece?

If you are a contented inhabitant of that World of Mysticism which the Metropolitan Museum (and most critics) have especially built for your residence, you will probably have no difficulty in understanding how it is possible that a particular one among the above eight HOMAGES TO THE SQUARE, (the one owned by the museum), could be very highly valued — at \$10,000 say — and the other seven of them, despite their extremely close resemblance (but not duplication) — could be worth practically nothing. You have been prepared for belief in such absurdity by the museum's having taught you that "a second-rate picture along the lines of the Picasso is simply no good at all" — by the museum's having taught you, that is, that great gaps exist in art, on one side of which are "immortal masterpieces" and on the other side "mere trash," with nothing in between. Now gaps are okay in their place. If the combination 11-46-20 opens your bank vault you don't want it to open for 11-46-19. Agreed!! Let us assure you firmly, however, that man's nervous system is not organized with that inflexibility of preference. And let us assure you, even more firmly, that individuals and institutions who try to teach you otherwise are not interested in giving you an education but in putting something over. Their objective is to continue playing the witch-doctor, to continue rattling the bones, and thus keep you as subservient as ever to their supposedly incontrovertible (and hair-line) verdicts, the delivering of which simultaneously flatters their vanities and fattens their purses. If the "worst" of the above pictures is worth \$75 (and that's high, since we will gladly supply you replicas of it for \$8.95 each or \$95 per dozen) then the "best", whichever one it may be, is worth not more than \$85. The variations in their emotional impacts are negligible.

Perhaps the easiest way to satisfy yourself of the truth of what I have said is to take a ruler and "dash off" a few "homages" yourself, giving the squares different sizes and positions as fancy dictates. Certain preferences (or greater resistances to reiteration) will no doubt develop. But there is no preference (at the low force of preference here conceivable) which you cannot easily "kill", by over-exploiting it, either through looking too long at the homage you prefer or through drawing too many others closely resembling it. If one particular preference holds out unaccountably well, that is probably due to some idiosyncrasy of your own caused by your particular regimen of life — just as, for example, if you had a job at the Boston Public Library and were consequently exposed day after day to Puvis de Chavannes' rather anemic (this is meant to be descriptive rather than derogatory) murals there, you might establish a somewhat persistent liking for splashy-type art works as an offset. Of course, as you move away from the easy to do towards the hard to do, it becomes more and more difficult to kill these preferences. Hence the greater lasting power of preferences (if you have them) for more complex paintings such as Vermeer's *THE STUDIO*. But obviously paintings like Mr. Albers' *HOMAGE*, which can be turned out wholesale are not at all in that classification and therefore are far too vulnerable to fatigue to justify the Metropolitan Museum's purchasing them — especially as doing so miseducates the public. If the thought of thus "killing" a preference (or beauty) by over-perception revolts your "higher-nature" I can only suggest that you move to some other universe where the entire system is different. In this world you are killing the beauty of certain art works at the rate of hundreds per day, in every turning of your eyes in one direction or another, and apparently there is nothing to be done about it.

Mark of the Quack

A dependable sign of the honest teacher is his extreme care never to deliver dogmatic and arbitrary verdicts on matters which are obviously open to question. He presents you the arguments for and against; perhaps states which way his preference lies and then leaves the rest to you.

It is the notable absence of this policy in the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art* which so indubitably brands them as an educational atrocity.

Hale went on to become a drawing instructor at the League and elsewhere, seemed destined for genteel, professional obscurity until 1949, when the late Metropolitan Museum director, Francis Henry Taylor, tapped him for curator of contemporary American Art. Taylor was under heavy fire for having allowed the Met's purchases of modern American paintings to lapse. He gave Hale his wrinkled, balding, well-groomed head, and Hale began buying right and left.

Spreading his impeccable tails, Hale has ridden the art boom sky-high. "If something happens in San Francisco," he murmurs confidently, "it will usually cross my desk within a week. I know all the able artists who can give valuable opinions on new art. The rise in pictures I have bought is phenomenal; the market has moved up with me, you know?" Item: a large flaking Jackson Pollock abstraction, for which Hale paid a reputed \$32,000 in 1957, recently brought a \$75,000 offer from the dealer who sold it, might bring \$100,000 in the open market.

Hale believes that "good painting consists of good color, good composition and good drawing. Good drawing has declined tremendously in recent years, because if anyone draws well he is attacked as being sentimental or anecdotal. The result is that many teachers cannot draw well and neither can their pupils."

Hale's own drawings look rather like Rorschach tests that the doctor never thought of. Using India ink and a very long brush, Hale sketches in the shadows of ideas. These blot-like shadows have sensitivity and boldness — a happy combination — but what do they signify? Plenty, he says: "In some cases I think I have achieved negative realism. In a few years I think it will be possible to communicate with life on other planets around the sun. I suspect we will learn more about negative realism from the beings on other planets. Negative realism is in the subconscious. New artists must break a hole in the subconscious and go fishing there."

Rather revealing!!

Let's skip the question as to whether the market's moving up with Mr. Hale is evidence of the artistic merit of the pictures he has bought for the Metropolitan or is due merely to the prestige they derived from the Metropolitan's purchasing them.

Instead let's have a look at his almost unbelievably innocent remark that "good painting con-

sists of good color, good composition and good drawing."*

If meant to be taken seriously (and it seems to be) it's as if your banker should tell you importantly that all you have to do in order to make money in the stock market is to buy securities which are going to go up.

Well, rather than give the impression that I am hunting around too hard to find fault with the museum I shall merely point out that the museum (through Mr. Hale) had an opportunity here — as it had also in its *Seminars in Art* — to put in a sensible word or two about art and give the public a steer in the right direction. Instead it confirms the public in its belief that art is a mixture of Mumbo Jumbo (or "negative realism") and double talk. Too bad!!

And this, as I said earlier, is (some but not all of) the trouble which critics, art dealers (and museums) get you into when they try to make you think they have discovered a recipe for conquering fatigue — have found some quality (no matter how cleverly imagined) which is itself invulnerable to fatigue, and confers this invulnerability on whatever paintings it has theoretically been painted into.

* * * * *

Now, if you have jumped to the conclusion from all this that we claim to possess a sure-fire formula by which the Metropolitan (or any museum) can determine exactly which art works it should acquire, you are wrong.

We merely suggest that in refusing to recognize the factor of Fatigue, in ignoring the fair warning Fatigue must be conceded as plainly giving in many cases (e.g. *Homage to the Square*) and in relying instead, on semi-mystic "principles" (of which Mr. Hale's old bromide about what is "good painting" is an instance) a museum's chances of making successful guesses is greatly lessened.

In case the somewhat jeering and derisive tone which pervades this chapter annoys you our only excuse is that we regard it as a natural response to the hypocrisies and moonshine which men (and institutions) who ought to know better (and in their hearts often do) persist in disgorging in the pretence of giving America an education in art.

And do not interpret it, either, as indicating a tendency to deliver reckless or irrational allegations. If you find any errors which even approach for vacuity of thought and negligence those that abound in the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art* please call them to our attention and we shall be glad to acknowledge them.

*If you were under the impression that it had become impossible, by now, for any responsible authority (and most of all a Metropolitan curator) thus naively to over-work and hide behind the word "good" you were wrong. The malpractice is still prevalent.

For instance, Arthur Wesley Dow, in his book, *Composition*, gives this advice to painters:

"Take any landscape that has good elements, reduce it to a few main lines and strive to present it in the most beautiful way . . . try only to cut a space finely by landscape shapes — and the art in your composition will lie in placing these spaces in good relation to each other."

Allow me a million dollars a month for expenses and within ten years I will reduce to zero the "beauty" of any art work you care to name and hold it at zero indefinitely.

Chapter VI

Hurry Call for the Police

Abolish the police force, endeavor to establish an "honor system" as the sole curb against crime and the results of so reckless a procedure hit you fast and hard.

Not only would bank-robberies, kidnappings, hold-ups and black-mailings increase alarmingly, but the perpetrators of such malefactions would become annoyingly cocky and disdainful. Wearing rubber gloves when cracking the safe — or even wiping away the finger-prints afterwards — would be wasted effort; making certain not to leave a cigarette butt or broken cuff link at the murder scene would be a needless precaution and stealing an automobile to take your bride on the honeymoon would be common practice.

The profound thought behind this is that the honor system for anything beyond a stack of newspapers on a rack outside the railroad station won't work. Men haven't that much honor in them. Let them find out nobody is watching them and they'll take advantage every time.

And nowhere has the truth of this regrettable fact been more clearly demonstrated than with art critics. They aren't being watched; they know it, and they act accordingly.

Very possibly you may protest strongly that I am wrong here — that in no occupation are its practitioners more closely kept under guard — and you are right in a limited sense. Let a critic deny that *Moby Dick* is one of America's greatest novels, let him prefer *Gone With the Wind*, and other critics, I freely admit, will excoriate, flay, roast and chastise him without mercy.

But alleged "misdeeds" of this sort are not what I am referring to. They are merely infractions of the recognized "code" — things that "aren't done" by the "pros" — comparable to a barber's using a safety-razor (instead of the regular kind) on his customers, or a sailing-man saying "down-stairs" instead of "below".

The malefactions I have in mind are of a very different type. They consist of intellectual shell-games; cock-and-bull stories dressed up in arty swagger; chic-sounding nonsensicalities slid into you while your attention is drawn elsewhere, and they range from minor delinquencies — comparable to purse snatching in "ordinary" crime — to elaborate aesthetic swindles which require for their promulgating as complex a gang-organization as did the bootlegging racket during prohibition.

But either way — at every level of transgression — the general public are completely unable to protect themselves. They need expert help — help



Fig. 33: Self Portrait, Cezanne

from the *professional*, from the man who knows what's happening on the *inside* — who not only can see through at the barest glance (as a traffic cop sees through the speeder's stale alibis) the various subterfuges and pretenses of art criticism's petty crookdom but also has the knowledge and equipment to investigate and confute art criticism's more complex and established hoaxes.

Let's begin with a misdemeanor at the lower level, and work up gradually.

Here's one comment by the eminent critic, Roger Fry, in an effort to convince you that Cézanne's self-portrait (See Figure 33) is "bad".

"He has melodramatized himself, exaggerating the protrusion of his brow and the menacing expression of the eyes, giving to it the truculence of his own mood. In all this, it barely, if at all, escapes vulgarity, and is one of the very few works by him which we must call frankly bad."

To you as a layman, actively engaged in running your department store or real estate business, it probably sounds honest enough.

But not so to the professional — or "aesthetics cop" as he might be called — who has seen a million similar frauds.

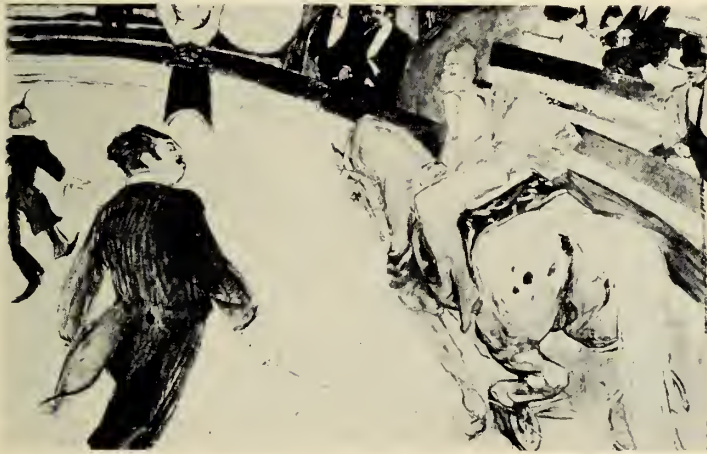
"Don't be such a greenhorn", he says to you with an indulgent smile. "That's an old one. There's nothing necessarily wrong about exaggerating brow-protrusion. Furthermore, it's not inconceivable, is it, that a man *could* exist of whom this portrait would be a close likeness without any exaggeration being required? And if such a man *did* exist, would he be forever denied the privilege of having his portrait painted (by Cézanne or anybody else) lest it might offend somebody who disapproved of menacing expressions?"

"And besides that, how can you compare the portrait with the person who was portrayed? No, a portrait must be judged *in itself*. Okay, friend, get the idea now? And I hope you'll never be fooled that way again."

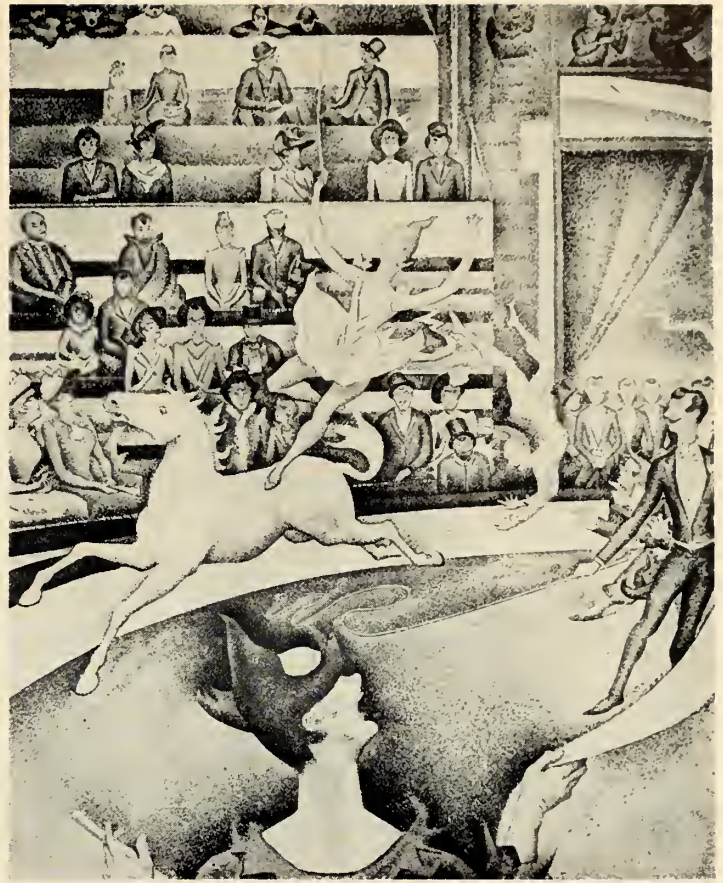
Whereupon he sends you on your way, enters Mr. Fry's misdemeanour in the police files and gets to work on the next job.

Perhaps a step above transgressions of this naive kind are those of which the perpetrators are more the "con-man" — more the smooth, slick talker who overpowers you with plausible-sounding priggery.

On this and the next page I present you three misdemeanors in this category (from the *Seminars*



Toulouse-Lautrec



Seurat

By all Seurat's theories *The Circus* should be a successful picture, but it is a disappointing one. The swirling lines, by theory, express action. The silhouettes are designed to move upward in a way that should express gaiety. . . . But the picture doesn't work. All the ingredients are present, but rule has triumphed in a frozen image. We need only compare this version of a circus with one by Toulouse-Lautrec to see how a more flexible — and probably only half-analyzed — application of the same general principles *has brought us a circus, while Seurat has been able only to offer us a diagram of one.*" John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

in Art)* accompanied by the paintings which instigated them. Please study them before reading further, noticing especially the passages italicized.

To you as an "ordinary citizen" who rarely runs up against such comments, they may seem fairly rational — perhaps even discerning. But it's because of the limitation of your experience — because you have heard only one side of the story.

Let's bring in our "aesthetics cop" to explain.

"So here you are again, he remarks philosophically, as you submit these new samples. "I expected you. That stuff is all plain nonsense. If you had read a tenth as much criticism as I have you wouldn't waste three minutes on it. Why? Because it's just selling-talk — one man's effort to pull you *his way*. Take for instance the gag about Tou-

louse-Lautrec bringing "us a circus while Seurat has been able only to offer us a diagram". It's just one man's random hunch. You fell for it because it came from a supposed authority and because it was the only opinion you happened to know about at the moment.

"Actually", he continues, "out of a possible 100 other opinions, I doubt if you'd find a half dozen which confirmed it — or even mentioned it; and I'm certain a good 80 of them would express decidedly contrary views. The critic is well aware, however, that you are ignorant of this fact and takes advantage of it.

"And the same goes for the critic's spiel about *The Laocoon*. 'We are amazed — but we are not moved' declares the critic as though any other reac-

*The fact that all of them come from the *Seminars* is not intended as an indication that the "misdemeanors" they represent are commoner there than elsewhere. It's only that inasmuch as the Metropolitan has so strongly emphasized the educational purpose of the seminars, it would seem that extra care should have been taken to exclude statements which are manifestly only personal whimsies and exhibitionisms.

Do you sometimes wonder why a critic must always be so positive in his statements — why he can never introduce such phrases as "in the opinion of most people" or "provided that" or "it depends"? The answer is very simple: a man can't talk in that open and candid fashion when he's operating a quackery. Let him seem to hesitate for a moment to "think" and he's lost.

tion were inconceivable. And then, before you have time to gather your thoughts he hits you quickly with a whimsy about how much more important it is to be aware of the created work than of the technique of creation — which, as you will see, is almost an exact contradiction of the view expressed by Roger Fry in connection with the Cézanne self-portrait. And take the slam, 'but it will never tell anybody anything much about the human spirit', which is delivered as though the *Laocoon* were thereby eternally damned. Don't let yourself be bullied that way. Actually how many art works do any better — or are even supposed to?

"What are you told about the human spirit by Cézanne's *Card Players*; by Ingres' *La Source* (see Page 108); by Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*; by Matisse's *Lady in Blue* (see page 110), or by a hundred other famous paintings. The great masters

who had occasion, in their careers, to paint a *Rape of the Sabines*, a *Leda and the Swan*, a *Susanna and the Elders*, a *David and Goliath*, or a *Venus and Adonis* were more than willing to let the painting's story (which was not originated by them) tell you what it could about the "human spirit" and direct their own main efforts — just as did the creator of the *Laocoon* — to 'the technique of creation' —



The *Laocoon*

It is a fabulous piece of carving; the sculptor uses every trick of the trade with breathtaking skill. *We are amazed — but we are not moved.* We respond to the sculptor rather than to the sculptured work. When we look at the Parthenon figures or at the *Hermes* or the *Aphrodite*, we are primarily aware of the created work and only incidentally of the technique of creation. But in the *Laocoon* the sculptor proclaims his own merit before he proclaims the nature of his subject. . . . *The Laocoon* will always be a popular work and in its own way a wonderful one, but it will never tell anybody anything much about the human spirit, no matter how dramatically it shows us that being crushed in the coils of sea serpents is an agonizing physical experience, John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.



Mrs. Frishmuth, Eakins

"With his brush as an instrument he explores the nature of Mrs. Frishmuth, this *calm, strong woman* with the unlovely face. Through recreating this face in paint, as his subject sat before him, he reveals and immortalizes [!!] a personality. We may be certain that as a likeness the portrait is accurate. We cannot know exactly what subtle variations and accents account for the revelation of character — *perhaps the brightening of an eye, the deepening of a shadow, the emphasizing of the peak of an eyebrow.* But these subtleties, whatever they are, account for the difference between a portrait by Eakins and the kind of accurate but meaningless likenesses produced by hundreds of his contemporaries, and of ours. The genius of Eakins is that he perceives, and then reveals, the psychological entity of an individual, without apparent recourse to any but the most objective means." John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

including whatever special effects they happened to be particularly interested in.

"The one about Eakins' portrait of Mrs. Frishmuth is even worse", he goes on. "The critic's entire case is built on the assumption that his individual interpretation of Mrs. Frishmuth — as a 'calm, strong woman' — would be *everybody's* interpretation. In reality it wouldn't even come near. Such interpretations as 'temperamental', 'shy', 'high-strung', 'nervous', 'diffident', 'retiring', etc. would be just as popular, [Note, as has been proved by actual experiment.] and, taken together, would far outnumber the one the critic was reckless enough to commit himself to. With the inevitable result, of course, that his entire argument explodes, and the nonsense about the miracles which the brightening of an eye, the deepening of a shadow or the peak of an eyebrow can accomplish is revealed (and this is genuine revealing) for what it is — namely, pure baloney.

"Of course", continues the aesthetics cop, "all this doesn't occur to you at the moment — and the critic is well aware that it won't; hence his willingness to

venture so flagrant a deception. Keep your eyes open when you mix with these racketeers, my boy, or they'll trim you. When you're worried come to me, just as you'd go to your banker about the gold mine some smart guy was trying to push on you. I know all the tricks — and you never can."

Well that's how an "aesthetics policeman" would talk if such a fellow existed, and, believe me, nothing would be a greater help to art — both in the creation and criticizing of it — than to have a good supply around of just such hard-boiled, tough-minded, and cynical chaps to protect you from what's now being put over on you.

Now as you move higher and higher in art criticism's "crime world" the worse the situation gets.

Let me show you a couple of fraudulences which are just as reprehensible as those just cited but can be exposed only by a rather more complex investigative procedure.

I'll start by presenting them to you in an *abbreviated* form, along with the verdict which was eventually reached, and then present them more in

If, out of any hundred critics, there were a minority — perhaps even so few as six or eight — who declined to indulge in the nonsensicalities I quote you in this book — the situation would be endurable. A rationally-minded man could confine his reading to what these more discerning fellows produced and get by comfortably enough. I regret to report, however, that critics of that heterodox tendency not only fail to attain even to the minuscule percentage of heterodoxy possessed by the four-leafed clover, but have no existence whatever.

This, of course, is an extremely regrettable fact in itself; but there is more to it than that. It reveals not only the depths of self-deception to which an entire group of men can be reduced without a dissenter among them, but also that we are faced here not with a case of bad judgment but with a phobia, whose nature I will disclose later.

A unanimity of acquiescence such as this does not occur through a "natural" course of events. Normally, there is always a residue of rebels against any doctrine, no matter how solidly entrenched. What holds these boys together is that they are all together in the same leaky boat, with only one thing to do — keep bailing — for their lives.

* * * * *

Being careful not to raise your hopes unduly, there is a chance, I think, that, as our contemporary critics reach the retirement age (with only enough energy left for a nostalgic book of reminiscences, analogous to Miss Adler's best seller, *A House Is Not a Home*) a new generation of literateurs, uncommitted to the dogmas of their predecessors and with clean slates to write on, may take over art criticism and give us something reasonably sensible; but, as I said, beware of over-optimism.



Figure 34A, Queen Christina,
by Holbein.
The original



Figure 34B, Centered

detail later so that you can verify the correctness of the verdicts.

Here's the first one. In discussing the Holbein portrait shown here in Figure 34, Mr. Canaday says (in the Metropolitan's *Seminars in Art*): "If the figure were truly centered it would relay to us the impression of a much more four-square, more obvious, more everyday woman."

As you see (and as may be verified by the more complete transcription shown later), no stipulations accompany the assertion — no such words as "usually", or "for most people".

"Teacher" says so; and so far as you are concerned, that's it.

If this were tossed in casually, as a "harmless whimsy", so to speak, it might get by. But it isn't. Mr. Canaday introduces it specifically to prove his theory that the composition of a portrait can (and in this case, does) reveal the character of the individual portrayed.

The actual fact is that centering the figure doesn't even come close to having that effect. And it fails so flagrantly to do so that Mr. Canaday plainly could not have made the slightest effort to verify it.

Out of some hundred and ninety-eight persons who cooperated in the investigation, not a single one reported the reaction to the "centering of the figure" which Mr. Canaday had predicted.

Next, let's examine a statement (just as bad) by another critic which is especially pertinent perhaps because its objective is the same as was Mr. Canaday's — namely, to prove that the composition of a portrait reveals the character of the person portrayed.

It involves Cézanne's portrait of his wife; and before reading further I suggest that you examine the reproduction of it shown in Figure 35 and decide, if you can, what it is in the picture that "*strikes you first*."

Having done so, compare *your* reaction with what, according to Mr. Rudolf Arnheim*, *should* strike you first, as he asserts in the following words:

"What strikes the observer first is the combination of external tranquility and strong potential activity. . . . The figure is stable and rooted, but at the same time it is as light as though suspended in space."

Again, it's the same story. So small a percentage of persons agreed with Mr. Arnheim's allegations that his making it seems as inexcusable as Mr. Canaday's making his.

Those are the results. And now for the tests by means of which they were attained.

The tests were conducted in a number of college classes under the supervision of their professors, as part of an educational project and with the understanding that I was free to publish the *statistical results*, provided I made it clear that any conclusions which I drew from them were my own and not necessarily those of the colleges.

In composing the questions which constituted the tests, I endeavored (and I believe successfully) to



Figure 35, Mme. Cézanne, by Cézanne

avoid slanting them in order to prompt such answers as I might be imagined as hoping for. And the students were specifically requested to answer according to their own reactions, without trying to guess what the *purpose* of the question might be.

What we were trying to find out, of course, was how valid were the (alleged) "proofs" offered by critics that a strong factor in revealing the character of the individual depicted in a portrait was in the composition of that portrait. And I am referring to composition here not as expressed by the depicted person's chancing to hold a sword in his hand or to be mounted on a horse — which might

Many Thanks

To those who cooperated in my efforts by conducting these tests in their classes.

Diane Duvigneaud, Assoc. Professor of Art, North Central College;

Prof. Stephen A. Emery, Dept. of Philosophy, University of North Carolina;

Rev. John Jolin, S.J., Assoc. Prof., Dept. of Classics, Creighton University;

Frank Niles, Assoc. Prof. of Sociology, Bowling Green State University;

N. H. Pronko, Prof. and Head of Psychology Dept., University of Wichita.

All conclusions drawn from the tests were on my responsibility and not that of the institutions above mentioned.

Theodore L. Shaw

*In his book *Art and Visual Perception*. Mr. Arnheim is president of the American Society for Aesthetics.

conceivably reveal character* — but as expressed by the sword being held upright or slanting, or by the horse being black, white, roan or bay.

The first critical assertion to be tested was made by Mr. John Canaday, in the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*. It concerns the portrait of Queen Christina by Holbein (see Figures 34A and 34B) and is expressed in the sentence which I have italicized in the following quotation:

"This portrait is by far the most realistic picture of our group. It may also be the subtlest as to composition, and it is the only one to use composition as a means of expressing an individual personality.

"All this, however, does not quite explain the feeling we have that here is a real person, a person of great reserve, of acute intelligence — a subtle woman, a most attractive but not quite approachable one. What is it about the picture that suggests this personality? It is largely a question of arrangement; it is a matter of her pose and the placement of the figure in space.

"Recalling the painting, even after having seen it frequently, you would probably have the impression that Christina is shown directly facing us in the center of the picture. Actually, however, the figure is turned slightly away on our left, and its axis (from the head along the opening of the gown to the floor) is well to the left of the center. *If the figure were truly centered it would relay to us the impression of a much more foursquare, more obvious, more everyday woman.* As it is, the slight turn of the body and the slight variation from center constitute a removal from us — very slight it is true, but enough to make the direct gaze of the eyes all the more arresting. This off-centering of the picture could have produced an uncomfortable off-balance effect, but the unexpected white oblong of paper pulls enough interest toward the right to bring the arrangement back into stability. The result is balance, but balance with a greater feeling of life than we could have had if the figure, so static and reserved, had been placed absolutely frontally, in the absolute center."

The test was conducted in two steps. The students were asked to compare the original portrait (Figure 34A) with a variant (Figure 34B) in which the picture had been narrowed by cutting off enough from the right-hand edge so that the figure was centered. They were then asked to indicate by a check mark whether or not their reading of the

woman's character had been changed. The vote was as follows:

Changed	44
Unchanged	154
Total Vote	198

Now although these results do not fully confirm my own personal (and no doubt cold-blooded and perhaps prejudiced) opinion that there should be no change *at all* in the character readings (the same woman being there all the time) it will be seen that the results were more than three to one *against* the change.

However, that is not all. A second step was taken. It consisted in presenting the ballot shown below, to the 44 students who reported seeing a change.

Ballot

Compare again the original picture with Variant and try to decide *in what way* the narrowing of the picture has changed your reading of the woman's character.

If any one of the following suggested changes comes close to being the change you noticed, place check mark against it.

(Mark only one square)

	<i>Results</i>
She becomes more self-confident	3
less self-confident	4
More obvious and every-day	0
Less obvious and every-day	4
Shrewder and more suspicious	13
Less shrewd and suspicious	5
More sophisticated and tolerant	0
Less sophisticated and tolerant	4
Warmer and more approachable	0
Less warm and approachable	3
If none of the above changes in her character comes close to being the change you noticed, mark here	8

As you will see from the results tabulated against each of the ten imagined "changes in reading" the change which Mr. Canaday supported ("more obvious and everyday") received no votes at all.

Next, the Second and Third Tests

Both these tests were applicable to Cézanne's portrait of his wife, as reproduced in Figure 35.

And the critical assertion which it was our intention to investigate is expressed in the italicized sentences in the second paragraph of the following quotation from Mr. Rudolf Arnheim's book, *Art and Visual Perception*.

"Much of what is being said about art these days leaves the bystander in the position of a person to whom the functioning of an unknown machine is explained without any intimation of the use of the machine. Only when he is told that the work of art has a content — and that all the organizing of color and shape occurs exclusively for the purpose of conveying that

What Can Give You Your Biggest Laugh at Critics!

It's to see them excoriating an artist for catering to the public's ignorance and then to see them conducting their own profession in a manner which would be impossible except for that ignorance.

*Although many a wielder of swords wouldn't even swat a fly with it and many a rider of horses is looking forward eagerly to the moment he can dismount.

content — only then will he understand why those balanced forms might regard him. . . .

“Cézanne’s portrait of his wife . . . was painted in 1888-1890. *What strikes the observer first is the combination of external tranquillity and strong potential activity. The reposing figure is charged with energy, which presses in the direction of the woman’s glance. The figure is stable and rooted, but at the same time it is as light as though suspended in space. It rises, yet it rests in itself. This subtle blend of serenity and vigor, of firmness and disembodied freedom, may be described as the particular configuration of forces that represents the theme of the work.* How is the effect achieved?

“The picture has an upright format, the proportion being approximately 5:4. This stretches the whole in the direction of the vertical and reinforces the upright character of the figure, the chair, the head. The chair is somewhat slimmer than the frame, and the figure slimmer than the chair. Thus there is a scale of increasing slimness, which leads forward from the background over the chair to the foreground figure. At the same time the shoulders and arms form an oval around the middle point of the picture, a centric core of stability that counteracts the pattern of rectangles and is repeated in small scale by the head.

“A dark band divides the background into two rectangles. Both are more elongated than the whole frame, the lower rectangle being 3:2 and the upper, 2:1. This means that these rectangles are stressing the horizontal more vigorously than the frame stresses the vertical. Although the rectangles furnish a counterpoint to the vertical, they also enhance the upward movement of the whole by the fact that vertically the lower rectangle is taller than the upper. According to Denman Ross, the eye moves in the direction of diminishing intervals — that is, upward in this picture.

“A scale of increasing slimness, which leads from the background toward the observer was noted above. This crescendo effect is enhanced by a number of other features. The three main elements of the picture overlap each other spatially: a scale of three planes leads from the background over the chair to the figure. This three-dimensional scale is supported by a two-dimensional one — a series of steps — that rises from the small fraction of the dark band at the extreme left over the corner of the chair to the head. Similarly, a scale of increasing brightness leads from the dark band to the light face and hands, which represent the two focuses of the composition. All these factors combine to a powerful, stepwise forward movement. . . .

“If this analysis is correct, it will not only exhibit the wealth of dynamic relationships that a work of art contains but also demonstrate that these relationships establish the particular balance of rest and activity that was

earlier described as the theme or content of the picture. Only by realizing how these relationships interpret the content can we understand and appreciate their artistic excellence.”

Now let me sum up — as briefly (and I hope honestly) as I can — what this colossal harangue* tells us.

First it tells us that for a painting to be understood, it must have a content or theme.

Second that for this particular painting that theme is “the figure’s combination of external tranquillity and strong potential activity” etc., as above cited in the quotation’s second paragraph.

Third, that the picture’s composition — its organizing of color and shape — occurs exclusively for the purpose of conveying that theme.

Let’s omit the question of whether or not it is really worth the bother to paint a portrait just to impart that single and rather limited impression. Instead let’s concentrate on the fact that Mr. Arnheim has tricked his readers with the same “intellectual gold brick” that Mr. Canaday used in our previous sample — namely in taking a thoroughly personal (and completely unverified) opinion and using it as a foundation on which to build his theory of the wonders that composition can accomplish.

The “gold brick” lies, of course, in Mr. Arnheim’s bland statement of what it is in the picture that *strikes the observer first* — presented to you as though the impression were obvious — as though no man in his senses could derive any other impression than just that single one. The reader is supposed to *concede* that impression. Unless he does, all the rest of Mr. Arnheim’s discourse is meaningless.

No, it won’t do. What first strikes the observer is not at all what Mr. Arnheim declares it to be.

In fact I will risk the assertion that if four hundred “observers” (and let them be as cultured as you like, provided they are neutral) were asked to state in one sentence what *first strikes them* in the picture there would not be so many as five out of the whole lot whose statements — unless prompted in advance — would even remotely resemble what first struck Mr. Arnheim.

Now although I have no direct proof of this claim of mine, I have what comes pretty close to it. It consists in two tests conducted among college students in a manner similar to that used for Mr. Canaday’s assertion.

(Continued on page 72)

*Long as it is, I have omitted more than half of it. The rest, however, is simply more of the same — a further analyzing of the various “counterbalancing elements,” “overlapping planes,” “lateral movements” and “retarding sub-movements” which Mr. Arnheim discerns. I do not wish to imply that elaborate analyses of this type are necessarily objectionable. If they can be used to study Fatigue, they could be acceptable, but as foundation for dictating some necessary revelation of character they seem worthless.



Of which of the eight portraits here and opposite can it most correctly be said that "what strikes the observer first is the combination of external tranquility and strong potential activity?"



5



6



7



8

(Continued from page 69)

For the first of these two tests we used the "ballot" shown below.

Ballot

"Before you do anything else study this portrait briefly and try to decide what impression from it comes to you rather quickly and noticeably. It can be either your impression of the woman's character and frame of mind, or the impression conveyed by the posture she has adopted, or a combination of the two.

"Having done so, compare your impressions with those suggested below. If any one of them comes near your own, indicate by a check mark which one it is. Check only one.

	Results
1. A stern and uncompromising woman.	42
2. The woman's resentment at being removed from other occupations for an unwelcome and boring duty.	17
3. The figure's combination of external tranquillity and strong potential activity.	21
4. A rather masculine woman with mean eyes.	34
5. A self-centered woman concentrating on her own thoughts and oblivious to her surroundings.	41
6. The figure is stable and rooted and at the same time is as light as though suspended in space	4
7. A woman who has had bad news and is trying to think calmly before taking definite action.	12
8. A woman angry at herself for having made a wrong decision.	5
	<hr/> 176

The results of the voting are tabulated at the right of the ballot.

However before you analyze their meaning I ask you to observe that the test is more than fair to Mr. Arnheim in that with only eight impressions to vote for in all, two of them (#3 and #6) are on his side, thus — other conditions being equal — giving him a twenty-five percent likelihood of winning the contest. Nevertheless, in spite of this advantage the total of votes on #3 and #6 was only 25 out of 176 — or only a shade over 14 per cent.

From which I believe I could correctly assume that if I should include only one of Mr. Arnheim's "impressions" (say the most popular one, #3) and if I should gradually increase the number of other possible impressions to vote for — say to ten, twenty or fifty — all of them plausible but different from Mr. Arnheim's — I could easily reduce the percentage of votes in his favor to as low as four or five per cent. Which statement, if correct, and I think it is, justifies my allegation that, without Mr. Arnheim's own impression being put before the observers *in words*, only a negligible quantity of them would so much as think of it.



Figure 35, Mme. Cézanne, by Cézanne

For the second test of Mr. Arnheim's allegation we adopted a method which is even more convincing, I believe.

We presented to ninety-two students the assortment of eight portraits reproduced on the previous two pages, accompanied by the ballot shown below.

Ballot

Assume that for reasons of your own you desire to own a painting of which the theme is: *the figure's combination of external tranquillity and strong potential activity*. With this understanding and disregarding your personal preferences, indicate your first, second and third choices among the paintings shown.

My first choice is Painting No. —

My second choice is Painting No. —

My third choice is Painting No. —

The results, scoring first choice as 5; second choice as 3; and third choice as 1, were as follows:

#2	358
#5	158
#8	142
#3	100
#4	71
#7	38
#6 (Portrait of Mme. Cézanne)	11

Now in case you question the accuracy of these tests — and I hope you do, because obviously they are mere approximations — I urge you strongly to make similar tests of your own.

They will come out differently, no doubt, but those differences will not be sufficient, I feel sure, to confute the general conclusion which I reached — namely that both Mr. Canaday's and Mr. Arnheim's statements were erroneous and so completely so as to be inexcusable under the circumstances.

But that isn't all. You must also bear in mind that there is nothing unusual about these atrocities. They *permeate* criticism.

In the Metropolitan *Seminars*, for example, there are a good hundred or more allegations* at least as fraudulent as those I have exposed to you in this book — thrown in without analysis or even thought — based on nothing except whimsy and idiosyncrasy and made possible only by the regrettable

absence of an "aesthetic police force" experienced in the malefactions of art criticism and with a duty to give you the protection from them to which you are entitled.

* * * * *

Not knowing how deeply you, as an individual, have explored art criticism's lower depths of crime; not knowing, either, how strongly you have maintained — at your present age-level — the dependent and trusting disposition with which you (and all men) first come into the world, I can only guess whether or not (without the warning words I have written) you would have been taken in by the various bamboozlements, flim-flammeries, and hoc-us-poci I have cited to you in this chapter.

The fact remains, however, that, regardless of the high degree of thinking power to which you yourself have climbed, it would be impossible for preposterous stuff of this kind to appear in important books (e.g., the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*) unless the great mass of people swallowed it whole, and without the least suspicion of the damage it was doing to their insides.

*See Appendix A.



Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer, by Rembrandt

After keen competition with the Cleveland Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum acquired this painting at an auction sale in New York, for \$2,300,000.

Various Methods for the Metropolitan Museum to Spend \$2,300,000

1. The *Swanky, Show-off Method*. Disregard the fact that the museum already owns thirty Rembrandts and put all the money into buying one more. This method supports the notion that art is immortal, encourages the public to buy paintings out of snobbery and out of a desire to impress other people, removes that much money from the art market and makes it correspondingly more difficult for the contemporary artist to make a living out of his job.

2. The *Educational Method*. Use two million dollars to build a new wing on the museum and stock it with three hundred copies (at \$1000 each)

of famous paintings in other countries and at present not available to New Yorkers. This method serves also to bring home the fact that, so far as visual appreciation is concerned, a good copy is ninety-nine per cent the same thing as an original.

3. The *Distributional Method*. Establish museum branches in various sections of the city, thus bringing art more conveniently within reach of those who might benefit therefrom.

And so on; almost any method is better than Method 1.

Trying to Guess Which Way the Cat Ought to Jump

An artist can waste a great deal of time despising his fellow-men for their "lack of taste" — especially when that lack of taste expresses itself in their inappreciation of his own work. His mistake, of course, is in having allowed critics to persuade him that there is only one path to beauty, in one direction; instead of a million paths, in a million directions.

When he discovers his mistake he can then adopt either of two policies. He can "maintain his integrity" (as critics like to phrase it) and wait for the public to catch sight of him on his distant spot, and follow him there — which they may never do — or he can coax the public along in his direction by creating a few art works half way between where he is and they are — as a friendly gesture.

To make a moral issue out of which policy he should adopt is a little like making a moral issue out of which policy should have been adopted by the first man who tasted caviar or ate an oyster (and perhaps found a "pearl" in it) or by the first man who (chancing to push aside some bushes) found the Mammoth Cave or glimpsed Niagara Falls; should he have disclosed his discovery or kept it a secret?

To my way of thinking, the discovery of new paths to beauty is so useful to everybody that the man who finds one does better in spreading the news to his fellow inhabitants of earth than in striking a dignified pose where he is and waiting for them to arrive there through the gradual expansion of their "appreciative powers."

On the other hand, there is always the chance that mankind may be making especially good progress along some other path, at the moment — under which circumstances all he can do is take it as easy as possible until their progress slows up enough so that he can draw their attention his way.

No one path to beauty is necessarily the best. It depends.

Chapter VII

Choose Your Own Slogan

Despite Oscar Wilde's famous dictum ("All Art is quite useless") art is just as practical as fish chowder — though perhaps more subtly so.

It comes into being as soon as man grows bored with merely having a roof over his head, with merely having enough clothes to be warm and enough food to keep him operating efficiently. The prospect of devoting all his life to providing himself with these necessities, and nothing else, becomes as great a hardship as was originally the absence of the necessities themselves.

In other words, art is a necessity which is a bit further along the road to progress than the rest of them — that's the only difference. It's an escape from monotony and fatigue — from the wear and tear of life.

As soon as man gets tired of producing just plain pots and pans the idea comes to him that it would be fun to make them in fancy shapes, or to scratch designs on their surfaces. When his ordinary head-dress becomes banal he sticks a feather in it; when shouting becomes stale he sings; when talking becomes dull he invents stories.

And so on, in a continuous process up to what Phydias, Tintoretto, Dante or Mozart were impelled by their fatigue patterns to create and — looking into more recent times — up to what Rodin, Matisse, Bernard Shaw or Moussorgsky liked to occupy themselves with.

As you can imagine, this extremely matter-of-fact and realistic concept of art differs so radically from the dreamy and romantic concept held by the Metropolitan Museum that an equally radical difference must exist between the museum's idea and ours in the proper way of teaching the subject.

The extent of that difference can best be pictured, I believe, by assigning to each of us a rallying-cry or slogan.

The museum's, it seems, could most fairly be expressed as

Hurrah for Beauty!

Attempt To Define Art

Art is what men create in order to rest those sections of their nerve systems which are tired and to activate those sections which are not tired.

If this definition includes too many creations which are not sufficiently "aesthetic", you can restrict it by including only those creations which belong in the fine arts. The general principle, however, remains unaltered.

And regrettably it has a wide popular appeal.

All those idealistic persons who like to call themselves "beauty-lovers" — all those who get a big kick out of "being artistic" — out of standing in front of a picture and observing the failure of other persons ("boors" would be a good name for them) to derive the same enjoyments that they do, respond enthusiastically to the clarion-call.

And yet, in reality — unless you remove the factor of pleasurability from beauty (and how can you!) — it is clear that *everybody loves beauty*. It's a spontaneous response, automatic, inevitable. Nobody has a monopoly.

In other words, when an individual regards himself as a "beauty-lover" he is merely flattering himself, asserting that his "beauties" are the correct beauties.

My slogan, though less inspiring, is more sincere, I think, and far more effective.

Complexify Yourself!

It requires simply that you expand your capacity to see — not necessarily in certain specified directions, as the Metropolitan Museum advocates — but in *any direction that suits you*; in a *multitude* of directions if you aspire to be "well-balanced" or in a *single* direction if you prefer to specialize.

Whether the infant in the cradle, who is tired of sucking his thumb, decides to complexify himself by reaching for a rattle — and thus developing his sense of sound — or perhaps to complexify himself by grasping a ball — and thus learning what "rolling" and "bouncing" are — is a matter for him to decide. The essential thing is for him to get going and *do it*, whatever it is — thus moving himself into new territory, keeping himself interestingly employed and resolutely tackling his life-time task of fighting off as long as possible his eventual defeat by fatigue.

We are all busy on the same job. It's only that we have progressed a little further than he has.

The objection to the museum's slogan

"Hurrah for Beauty,"

therefore, consists in the fact that it is an effort to stop this continuous progression.

Every time you accept the museum's verdicts (and it delivers them profusely) as to the *inevitable and everlasting beauty* of this, that or the other art work you are inhibiting yourself — you are taking pride in your own (and all mankind's) stupidity and inability to continue moving ahead. You have somehow convinced yourself that your continuing to adore whatever art works the museum has "sanctified" does not demonstrate (as it should) what a dumb-bell you are, but what an astounding capacity you have for "appreciating beauty."* You

*and you are demonstrating, as well, your incapacity to read human nature. You are failing to take into account the fact that all art museums are under a continuing temptation (in self-defence) to support and spread abroad this notion of the inexhaustibility of art, and that, no matter how high their ideals, they will occasionally yield to that temptation.

have ceased to be a free and independent man.

Don't interpret this diatribe, however, as meaning that you should restrain your enthusiasms. By all means grasp all the beauties that come your way, and be thankful.

But in the minute that you "immortalize" these beauties — in the minute that you see them as being the result not merely of their creators having taken a great forward step and done something difficult (like Roentgen's discovery of the x-ray)

but as *arrivals at an end point* you have sunk back into your mental feather-bed and resigned from active life.

When the day comes (and it will) that men recoil from attending a performance of *Macbeth* for the same reason that they recoil now from a rendition of *Editha's Burglar* (namely that they already "know it") you may be certain that they have been making some excellent progress lately — not retrograding.

Half-hearted Rebellion

Here's an interesting comment by a famous sculptor which I interpret as confirming the ideas about fatigue which I have expressed in this book, although I doubt if he would see it that way.

"Most people wouldn't say that a bulldog or a bull is beautiful in the sense that they would say a gazelle is beautiful or a deer. But a bulldog or a bull or a rhinoceros has a terrific force in him, a strength that even if you don't immediately realize it, you come to recognize as beautiful and important. I find a bull much more beautiful than a frisking lamb; or a fleshy beech-tree trunk much more beautiful than an orchid." Henry Moore, as quoted in *Time*, September 21, 1959.

What Mr. Moore believes he is doing here, I think, is *revolting from convention*, and I sympathize with him in that general policy. Unfortunately, however, his revolt is incomplete — is directed only against what might be termed a small phase of the convention.

It's as if he should announce boldly: "I think it's silly the way people worry about Friday the Thirteenth. What can a mere date do to you! I prefer being careful not to walk under ladders."

In other words, Mr. Moore doesn't see where his real enemy lies concealed.

To grow tired of seeing everybody love a gazelle, "because it's so beautiful", is natural, no doubt; but why try to correct the situation by making the same mistake in another style — why love a rhinoceros simply because it has "beauty" of a different kind — to wit, that of "terrific force"?

Why not, for instance, love (aesthetically, of course) a shark for its "ruthless cruelty"; a pig for its "honest bestiality"; or a whale for its "aloof majesty", and so on?

Well, I think you get the idea. If an artist wants to revolt against a convention (e.g. one-best-wayism) let him actually revolt, not merely toss a small brick.

Chapter VIII

Slow War on Confusion

Assuming from your presence on this page that you have not been repelled by the decidedly cold and hard-boiled attitude which has permeated my previous pages, I am emboldened to risk a statement which I had previously been holding back as being too discouraging — namely that when you are finished with this book Art will seem more confusing than it did before.

Its unattraction will be tempered, however, by my saying firmly *all the better for you*.

To explain this cryptic utterance, I present the following analogy.

Your problem, we will say is: *what causes volcanic eruptions?*

A certain group of men — let's call them men of the art-critic type — solve it for you thus: "God has placed a tremendous fire in the centre of the earth as a convenient means to keep men under control. When their misdeeds have climbed too high He causes this fire to erupt through the earth's surface, thereby kills off the most reprehensible fellows and simultaneously throws a big scare into the rest. If one eruption is worse than another it's simply that God was angrier that time."

A very neat solution, is it not? You have your answer and all is well. No further thought is required — which (to some people) is a comfort.

Another group of men, however, — let's call them the science-minded type, — approach the problem from a different angle.

"Apparently," they say, "the earth was once a whirling mass of incandescent material. As the surface cooled off, a crust formed, becoming thicker and thicker with the passage of the centuries.

"Granting this theory is correct", they continue, "then the occasional eruptions are probably the result of local weakness in the crust, or of special pressures inside. As to why one eruption should be worse than another, we can only make guesses; but there is no reason to believe that it is from anything but natural causes. As we gradually learn more on the subject we will pass the knowledge on to you, but in the meanwhile, we urge you to take it easy, and not be taken in by fairy tales concocted by charlatans to mislead you."

Now, what I am trying to bring out by this analogy (exaggerated though it may be) is that despite the fact that I am taking away from you the handy (but fake) set of rules and laws (labeled "eternal verities") which critics have been soothing

you with — and despite my giving you nothing with which to replace them but a vague theory about FATIGUE — and despite the fact that I am thereby *seemingly* making art more confusing than ever, I am really not doing so at all, but am only picturing it accurately with the degree of confusion which (along with astronomy, ethics, gravity, and economics) it *naturally possesses* at the present moment.

The job which faces man in understanding art will be accomplished (if at all) by a slow, arduous and patient chipping away of the confusion which surrounds it and not by a "hurrah-boys", flag-waving charge against the barricade, and shouts of "Victory".

The contemporary style of art critic, with all his whimsies, intuitions and puerilities (as per samples I have shown you) is not the man to be in charge.

He is an impatient, reckless, head-strong individual who doesn't want — and can't stand — anything unsolved around. He takes pride in being that way, and believes that his "ability to feel" — his amazing "sensitivity", that is — is what qualifies him in his profession.

Now, men of this fervid, impetuous disposition are all very well in their places. They may come up with a useful hunch once in a while, but to put them in as bosses of any complex endeavor would be like putting the head tea-taster into Sir Thomas Lipton's position to run the company. In no time at all, everything would be in a muddle.

Let them be kept strictly in their niche, with the privilege of slipping ideas into the suggestion-box, but no more.

* * * * *

Having adopted this defiant attitude toward confusion in art (in contrast to the critic's abject backing away from it) let's take a close look at how much of it there is before we embark on our slow slicing-away process.

And let's admit immediately that it's awing in its magnitude.

There are too many kinds of men — too many religions, races, philosophies, temperaments, and creeds — for it to be otherwise.

To adjust art criticism simultaneously to the director of the Prado Museum who nonchalantly — and without even so much as a turn of his eyes — strolls by Bosch's *Garden of Delights* and also to the fervent young student who regards that painting as an inexhaustible masterpiece; to adjust it, that is, without having recourse to priggery, is no easy task. To give consideration to the mental prodigy and also to the seemingly stupid man who has nevertheless made himself exceedingly useful in his job, whatever it is; to make proper allowances for the chap who has lived all his life in New York — but never read a book — and for the chap who has spent all his life teaching literature in the high school of a small town — but never visited an exhibition of paintings — is equally complex. And so on, practically without limit.

A frightening picture, you may say; and enough to justify almost any man's following the critic's

example and jumping overboard into mysticism in order to reduce the pressure on himself? No, I don't think so. The pain is not lessened by any such capitulation. Even the intellectual masochist would find it difficult to convert himself into so abject a doormat.

Now as to how much of this confusion is chip-pable-off, I prefer not to say.

Instead of adopting any specific degree of pessimism or optimism as to the outcome, let's just make a try. Some satisfaction is derivable from the mere taking of your brain out of the deep freeze, inside which critics have so long been storing it, and allowing it to perform its natural function of checking the validity of all statements as we go along instead of gulping them down subserviently.

No matter how slow the progress (if any) I can at least promise that no "occultisms" will be hurled at you. If the word "beautiful" slips in occasionally, you will not have to guess in which one of its half-

dozen possible meanings it is employed.* There will be no word-juggling. Unity (which I discuss in the next chapter) will mean unity and not something the critics want it to mean. Truth will be truth; not a *higher truth*; and there will be no allegation that "art transcends truth." Purely personal emotions allegedly instigated by an art work will not be forced on you as inevitable and then used as foundation for a verdict. And so on. You will find it a decided change, I hope. But if not — if such a persistence of candor and rationality starves the mystic segment of your ego — then that makes it a lot easier — you simply continue drinking in the baloney that critics (seeing that you have preferred to remain their easy-marks) will now dispense to you more profusely than ever — or when that is temporarily unavailable you can always invite some friends over for a session with your Ouija board.

*It will always mean: having a high probability of being temporarily pleasurable to a certain group of people, whom I have in mind, either now or in the future.

Chapter IX

Unity Is No Virtue

Having promised in the previous chapter to be aggressively realistic and hard-boiled, let me begin by tossing overboard three bits of fatuity which have been infesting art for a long time:

Number one; that all great art works are simple.

Number two; that art is the reducing of chaos to order.

Number three; that unity is essential to art.

All three of them are complete frauds, concocted by critics for no other reason than to deceive you.

Great art works are *not* simple. On the contrary they are, and have to be, extremely complex. Appreciation of them is attainable only through education. Otherwise they could be learned by heart and the full reperception of them would be as easy and automatic (almost independently of the brain) as a reperception of the "pop" which follows the puncture of the toy balloon.

Nor is art the reducing of chaos to order. Any such reduction would be as fatal to art as would be a reduction in the opposite direction from order to chaos.

And finally, unity is no more essential to art than is disunity.

These confutations of mine (despite their validity) may not be enough, I fear, to win you over against doctrines which men have held so long as they have these.

The essentiality of Unity — to take the most strongly intrenched of them — is accepted practically without exception. It's the critic's god — sacrosanct, all-holy. He has not the slightest hesitation in declaring positively (as I will show you later) that an art work without unity is inconceivable; and his colleagues almost unanimously confirm him in this opinion.

So when I repeat — as I do — that all three of these doctrines are fakes, humbugs, hoaxes I have no right to complain if you ask me — a bit sarcastically, perhaps — how it happens that here — and in fact throughout this book — critics are always wrong and I am always right.

It's a natural question, I must admit.

The answer is simple, nevertheless.

Critics are not sincere men. They are partisans, politicians — not disinterested adjudicators. They

are intuitioners — not thinkers. And least of all are they educators.

And I make the statement firmly, resolutely.

In fact I am only too glad to bring this general accusation against them just here, because if you should challenge me to prove my accusation there is no place where I could make a better case for myself than in connection with Unity — no place where their guilt is more obvious.

On with the trial, therefore, and let's see how the verdict comes out.

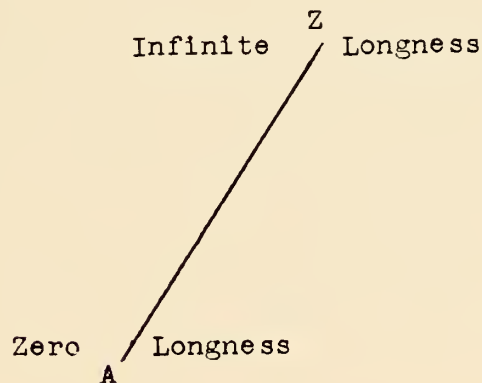
The first point I propose to make is that the three "frauds" I quoted above are really only *one* fraud, or, you might say, are all parts of the *same* fraud.

I risk this assertion because the three concepts (or qualities) *behind* them — namely Simplicity (with its opposite, Complexity), Order (with its opposite, Chaos) and Unity (with its opposite, Disunity) are not *different* concepts but *identical* concepts, *at least so far as art is concerned*. They all mean the same thing and are simply masquerading under separate names.

Let's analyze Simplicity-Complexity, to begin with, and when we have done so it will be clear, I think, that everything I have said about that concept applies equally to the other two.

Now if you are the type of fellow who collapses — or at least backs away — at the sight of a diagram I can only urge you to fight that infirmity as bravely as possible because — in the interest both of clarity and brevity — a few diagrams are unavoidable at this point. Nothing else will do.

Here is the first one.

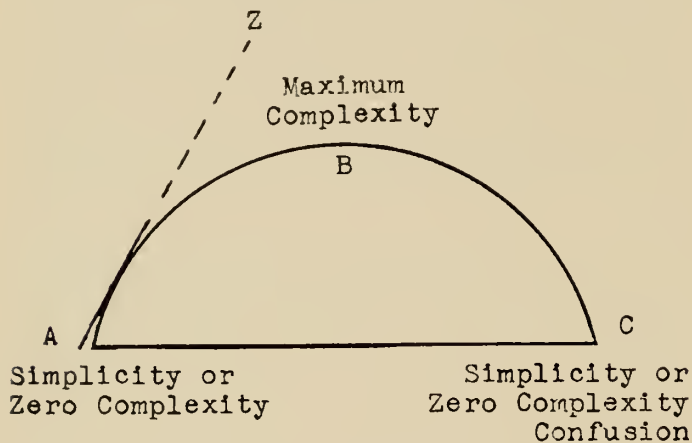


It is meant to illustrate the fact that there is a *steady and continuous* progression from the quality of shortness to that of longness, from A, at zero longness, to Z at infinite longness. The same diagram would do as well to illustrate the steady and continuous progression from low to high, from cold to hot, from light to heavy, from thin to thick, and so on. There are a million instances.

And if you should listen to critics you would believe that this diagram would be equally applicable to simplicity-complexity. But it isn't — at

least not so far as it concerns art. Here is the correct diagram for simplicity-complexity.

It starts off towards Z, as do the other qualities, but it immediately begins to fall away, climbs only to a high of *maximum complexity* at B and then drops down again to zero complexity (or hundred per cent simplicity) at C. It travels in a cycle, that is, from zero to a summit and then back to zero.



The reason being that you can only complexify an art work within the limits of man's ability to *perceive* complexity. As soon as you try to complexify mechanically beyond that point, the process of complexifying ends, psychologically; simplifying intrudes, despite you, and carries you nearer and nearer to that maximum of simplicity to which we apply the term confusion. In music, excessive complexifying ends up in "just noise," in literature it ends up in "mere words;" in architecture in a "hodge-podge of building materials;" in painting, in "utter chaos."

For example, if we regard the series of drawings below as representing a complexifying of the concept "line," it is obvious that at some point in this series (probably at "d" or "e")* we reach the maximum of complexity (so far as the human eye is capable of perceiving it). From that point on the complexity is declining to the simplicity of what we might term a mere "tangle of lines", at which point one "tangle" is emotionally indistinguishable from any other and has attained zero complexity.

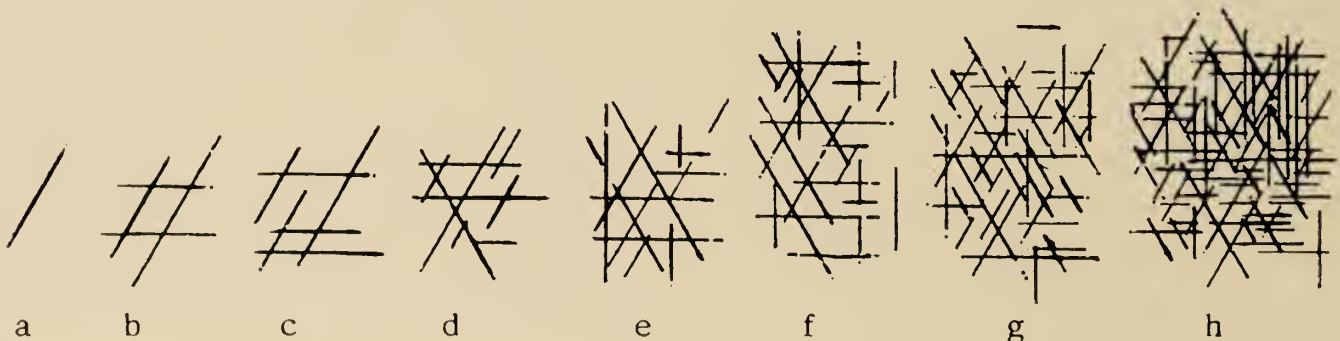
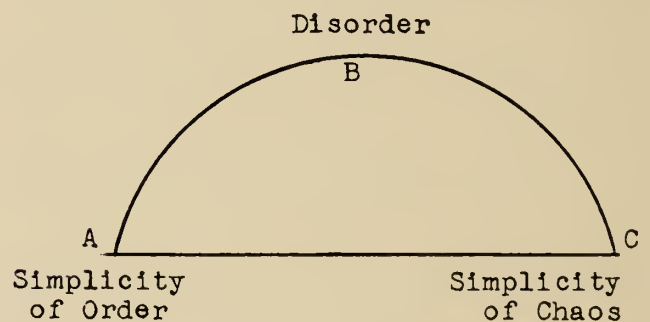
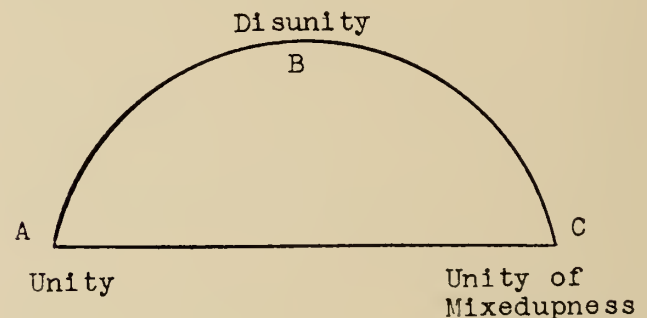
The vital point to remember — as I shall emphasize in the next few pages — is that the two end-drawings, at A and H possess the highest speed of tiring. The merest glance is sufficient to tell you

that A is just a *single line* and nothing more. There is no scope for scrutiny.

But as you move rightwards through B and C up to D (or E) there is continuously greater opportunity for the eye to take an interest and therefore a lower rate of tiring. From D on (or from E, as your eye tells you) the process reverses itself. F, G and H come closer and closer to being a mere *tangle of lines*, with less and room for any mental response except that of *confusion*. And in confusion, no matter what kind of confusion it is, the mind is not responding richly and broadly, along a multiplicity of nerve channels (as it would, for example, in sensing Stravinsky's *Fire-Bird Suite* or Da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*) but is reacting in a oneness of not-understanding, of anarchy, of mixed-upness, and usually in a concentration and intensity of that sensation which tires with extreme rapidity — almost to the extreme of actual pain.

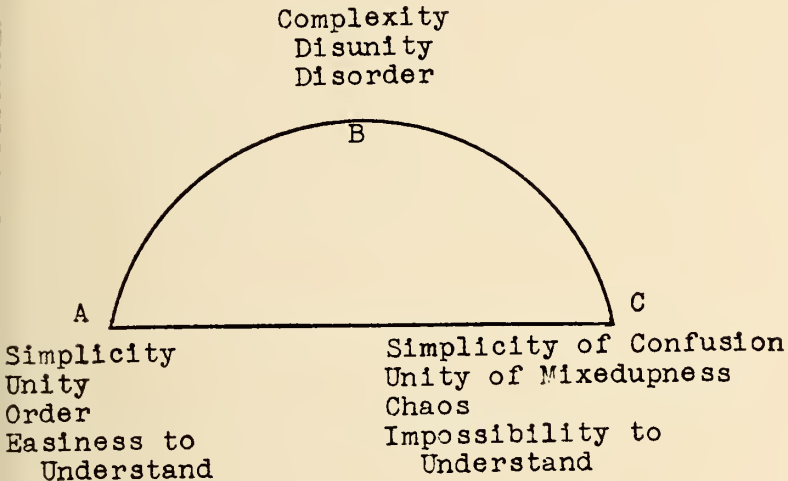
Simplicity-Complexity's possession of this cycle is important in itself, but it is also important because it helps us to see that the other two concepts, Order-Chaos and Unity-Disunity, — since, as I said, they are practically identical with it — also operate in the same up-down cycle.

Let me present you with the correct diagrams of both these qualities, as follows:



*Depending on your individual skill in interpreting complexity.

They are cycles, as you see, just as in the case of Simplicity-Complexity and the various concepts involved are so much the same things (as far as art is concerned) that you may treat them all as identical, merely changing the nomenclature thus:-



I suggest, therefore, that when, in succeeding pages, I chance to use any one of these terms, you be prepared to substitute for them any one of their synonyms. When I happen to be discussing simplicity and complexity, for example, I am simultaneously discussing unity and disunity. When I refer to "chaos", I am simultaneously referring to "simplicity of confusion" and to "unity of mixed-upness."

And, of course, travel through each of these cycles, under whatever name it is masquerading has the same effect on speeds of tiring as I demonstrated in the case of the simplicity-complexity cycle.

As you move through the cycle (whether from left to right, or right to left) the results tend to be beneficial (in reducing the speed of tiring) for only the first *part* of the cycle. To move (rightwards) from unity towards disunity is useful only until the disunity gets so "disunited" that it begins to turn into chaos. To move (leftwards) from chaos towards unity is useful only while you maintain enough "chaos" to encourage you to look around with interest for evidences of an approaching or possible unity and is useful after that, only until the unity becomes so obvious (as does the unity of this art work ██████) that you can fully comprehend it at a glance and never desire to see it again. *Complete* unity, of course, whether it is a unity of mixed-upness or a unity of simplicity, at either end of the cycle, is *almost always a disadvantage*. It has so high a speed of tiring that the chances of its possessing pleasurable (even momentarily) are too small to be worth considering. But this is only a probability and applicable only to an extreme case.

The fact that an art work possesses some specific degree of simplicity, unity or order determines its speed of tiring, true, but it has no necessary effect (except through probability) on its "beauty" or pleasurable.

This gives you a clear and honest picture, I think, of what these three qualities, simplicity-complexity, unity-disunity and order-chaos do to art. They are important influences in *speed of*

tiring, but so far as beauty (or pleasurable) is concerned they are *neutral*. To declare an art work to be either "good" or "bad" because it is "simple," "unified" or "ordered" is as senseless as to declare it to be "good" or "bad" because it features a strong red instead of a weak red, or vice versa.

Needless to say, this doesn't suit critics and they have therefore worked up a couple of "tricks" to make you think it isn't that way at all.

The first one is to give each of these qualities a *second personality*, so to speak. In addition to natural (or absolute) simplicity, unity and order, you are given *relative* simplicity, unity and order.

As illustration, Mr. Rudolf Arnheim in his book *Art and Visual Perception*, says:

"In an absolute sense, a thing is simple when it consists of a small number of structural features. In a relative sense, a thing has simplicity when it organizes complex material with the smallest possible number of structural features."

And elsewhere he declares:

"When a work of art is praised for 'having simplicity', it is understood to organize a wealth of meaning and form in an over-all structure that clearly defines the place and function of every detail in the whole."

What follows from this doctrine, of course, is that if a treatise on differential calculus, or on "adelo morphosity," were *as well organized as possible* it could have at least as much simplicity as *Little Red Riding Hood*, and perhaps more.

Or, from the opposite direction, an art work is "complex" only when the creating artist failed to make it as simple as he might have if he had been more careful in "organizing."

Or, applying the same principle to another quality, "lightness," a battleship and a canoe could be equally "light" if both had been made as *light as possible* considering what was required of them to fulfill the function of "battleship" and "canoe."

As a frolic in semantics this is well enough; and if critics used it for an honest purpose there might be no objection. Here I think they are not doing so. Their true purpose is to graft a new element into simplicity, Difficulty-of-doing, thus changing simplicity from a mere quality into a *virtue*.

Having done so, they acquire some (very slight*) justification for bestowing praise on an art work for its possession of "simplicity" — *relative* simplicity of course. It's just a trick, a quibble — but under the conditions mentioned in Chapter VI, (that is, without a police force to watch them) critics get away with it.

Now, turning to the next quality, Unity, let me show you how critics try to work the same trick there also — namely to bring difficulty-of-doing into the situation and make unity something hard to create and thus have the appearance of a virtue.

If you will examine what critics have to say about unity, as quoted on the next page, you will notice (besides the fervor of their adoration for unity) that it would be impossible, I think, for them to

(Continued on page 83)

*"Very slight," because what is difficult to do today may be easy to do tomorrow.

Passionate Love For Unity!

Don't count on a return of this love, however. Nobody can slap down an art work with so crushing and heartless a speed as can Unity.

"Composition implies unity; the words are synonymous. To say that a composition lacks unity is a contradiction of terms. If it does it is not a composition. In the fine arts unity is axiomatic." Maitland Graves, *The Art of Color and Design*.

See other comments by Mr. Graves on pages 90 and 91.

What seems to place it (Whistler's *Music Room*) just a little lower than first class is an eccentric edginess, and some lack of complete unity. Frank Jewett Mather Jr., *Estimates In Art*.

"Beauty consists in the perfection of internal relations, it is the qualitative aspect of the subordination of the parts to the whole. A thing is beautiful to the extent to which it is a perfect organization, and everything is an organization to some extent else it could not hold together. Works of art are more beautiful than other objects simply because in them the degree of perfection in internal relations has reached a high peak." James K. Feibleman, *Aesthetics*.

How Artist X Broke It Off

"Well, there it is," he remarked one day as he finished his art work. "I've got it *perfectly* united. Every element is interlocked with every other. Each line and form ties in with the rest. What a swell job! Darling Unity, I love you!"

But the next day he hated the art work. It's like a machine; it's too mechanical. The perfection of it bores you. So then he started *disuniting*. And sometimes he'd disunit it a great deal, and sometimes only a little, in order to find out just what was exactly the best degree of disuniting — until eventually he decided there wasn't any best. And that's how artist X's love affair with Unity came to an end.

"That the poem is lacking in unity is obvious (assuming, as I do, that unity is a literary virtue). Any part of '*The Waste Land*' can be switched to any other part without changing the sense of the poem." Karl Shapiro *Saturday Review*, February 27, 1960.

"Unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole; since if it lacks unity we cannot contemplate it in its entirety, but we shall pass outside it to other things necessary to complete its unity." Roger Fry — *Vision and Design*.

"Toscanini . . . can . . . give even a creaky old-fashioned opera like *Trovatore* or *Lucia* a sense of perfect musical unity, make every aria and scene lead breathlessly on to the next, and force the most exacting critic to swear that the score is a masterpiece of formal logic." Winthrop Sargeant, *Geniuses, Goddesses and People*.

"That fullest, triumphant unity which crowns the painter's work, which arrives when the ends are tightly locked to the means, when all parts fall into place and require and create one another so that they flow inexorably into a whole, when one can, as it were, experience the picture like a single sound made by many voices and instruments that reverberate without changing, that presents an enclosed and instantaneous variety, this unity comes for him (Cézanne) more often in the last years of his life." Clement Greenberg in *Cézanne and the Unity of Modern Art*.

I assure you that any such lightning-flashy and thousand-brickish reaction to a painting is not only impossible but (even if possible) would have an intensity of impact which would be unendurable beyond the merest instant. Without any prospect of a leisurely wandering of the eye in search of new pleasures — with nothing to look forward to except another solarplexian whack, in an exact duplication of the previous (and well-remembered) one — a long period of abstention from the art work would be required before you might be willing (out of curiosity) to risk a second exposure to it.

"The sense of unity derivable from any great painting is always a sense that from the foundation of the world precisely that combination of design and subject, of distribution of light and darkness, substance and space, had been waiting to be proclaimed." Helen Huss Parkhurst in *Beauty*.

Pretty Red Hot Stuff!

Does it amaze you that critics — who take such a pride in their own loathing of sentimentality, who have so boiling a hate of Edgar Guest, of Robert William Service (author of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*), of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, of Tobani (composer of *Hearts and Flowers*), of Tennyson (as the man who wrote *Charge of the Light Brigade*); of Kipling (as the man who wrote *If*) and their like — does it amaze you that such fervent despisers of sentimentality can themselves indulge in equally gross sentimentalities?

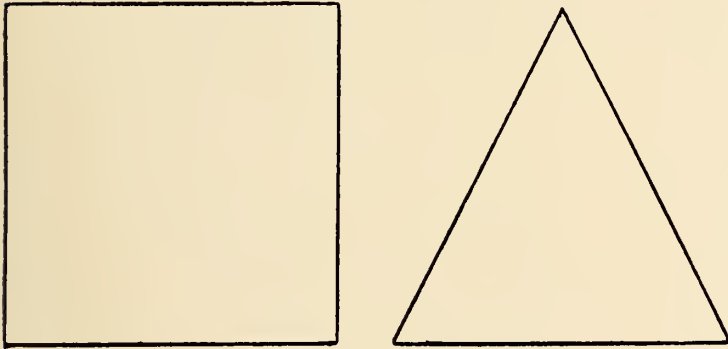
If so, I congratulate you on being among the extremely limited number of men who have refused to permit critics thus to pull the wool over their eyes; and I hope your amazement will grow gradually into a consternation and finally into a disgust.

Well, that's the universally accepted attitude towards unity. Unity is transcendent, prodigious, out-of-this-world and super. Actually — as any systematic analysis of the subject would show — it has no such effect. And if you ask why critics do not make this analysis, it's because they don't want to rock their own boat.

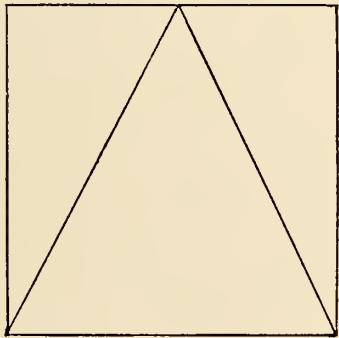
(Continued from page 81)

indulge in such rhapsodies unless they had changed unity from its basic definition ("oneness") into something extremely involved and mixed-up in which difficulty-of-doing was playing an important role.

No easy little unifying job, such as taking two elements like this



and unifying them like this



. . . would satisfy them. It must be a really marvelous unifying to count. Otherwise the world would be *full* of perfectly unified art works, and a limerick, a witticism, a short story, or a popular song ("Smoke Gets In Your Eyes") would deserve the same praise, so far as being unified is concerned, as a three-volume novel or a symphony in four movements. Under such conditions, unity really dwindles to a minor factor and difficulty-of-doing becomes the essential. Which faces critics with the problem of deciding whether they wish to use as their standard a difficulty-of-doing founded on man's intelligence as of today, as of what they think it will be ten or a hundred years from today, or as of what they think it *ought* to be.

No; dragging in difficulty-of-doing doesn't change anything.

Unity, regardless of whether it is "absolute" or "relative" remains a neutrality.

Now the second trick which critics use to deceive you as to the real nature of simplicity, unity and order, is to take what actually is merely a *formula* and try to turn it into a *definition*.

To illustrate, let me quote you the following "definition" of unity ("in literature and art") from *Funk and Wagnall's Practical, Standard Dictionary*:* "combination into a homogeneous artistic

whole, exhibiting oneness of purpose, thought, spirit and style with subordination of all parts to the general effect."

It's wrong in a number of ways.

First it's far too vague.

To define a woman as a creature with two eyes, a nose and a mouth wouldn't be any worse.

Under such a concept of unity, many widely differing things could share equal degrees of unity, such as a printing press and a rubber stamp ("handle with care"); an automobile and a wheelbarrow, and, in particular, all the art works in Figure 40.

Second, it's too much of a prettification — too much like defining a globe not merely as a "sphere" but as a "sphere without any rough corners or sharp edges." The purpose of making unity a virtue is too obvious.

And third, as I said, it's a formula (though the fact is not acknowledged and supposedly would horrify its adherents) not for *unifying* an art work but for *disunifying* it.

And worse still, it's the timid, sneaky way of doing it.

Maintaining a "homogeneous whole," "exhibiting oneness of purpose," "subordination of parts" etc. are merely components of a rather slick recipe by which an artist of the fraidy-cat type can take cautious steps deeper into disunity and conceal, as long as possible that he is doing so.

It's a little as if (with a wink of the eye) you should define "staying home," as "taking escape Route 3 (instead of escape routes 1, 2, 4, 5, or 6) *away* from home because it's the 'homiest' route, because nobody will see you there and because there's less danger of getting into trouble on it."

Eventually, of course, as the recipe is required to carry a heavier and heavier load — as more and more complexities and developments are piled on — the recipe — and the "unity" too — become so thin that nobody (except a critic) can see either one of them.

* * * * *

Now, how much more you want — or can stand — on this subject depends on how strongly (if at all) critics had you deluded in advance.

If your admiration for unity was always on the cold side then the rest of this chapter will do little more than demonstrate how right you were.

If, however, you were very ardent about it — and some of your ardor still lingers — I would like an opportunity, in the next few pages, to shake you out of that condition and thus let you direct your affections elsewhere.

As a first step in doing so and apropos of what I termed Trick #1 (involving *Relative Unity* and *Difficulty-of-Doing*) I present you the series of art works shown in Figure 36.

The eight "art works" in it, represent my idea of what could result if a certain Artist Jones were given eight successively more difficult "unifying jobs" to do and required to do the best unifying

*Don't blame the dictionary's editors for this error. They were talked into it by critics.

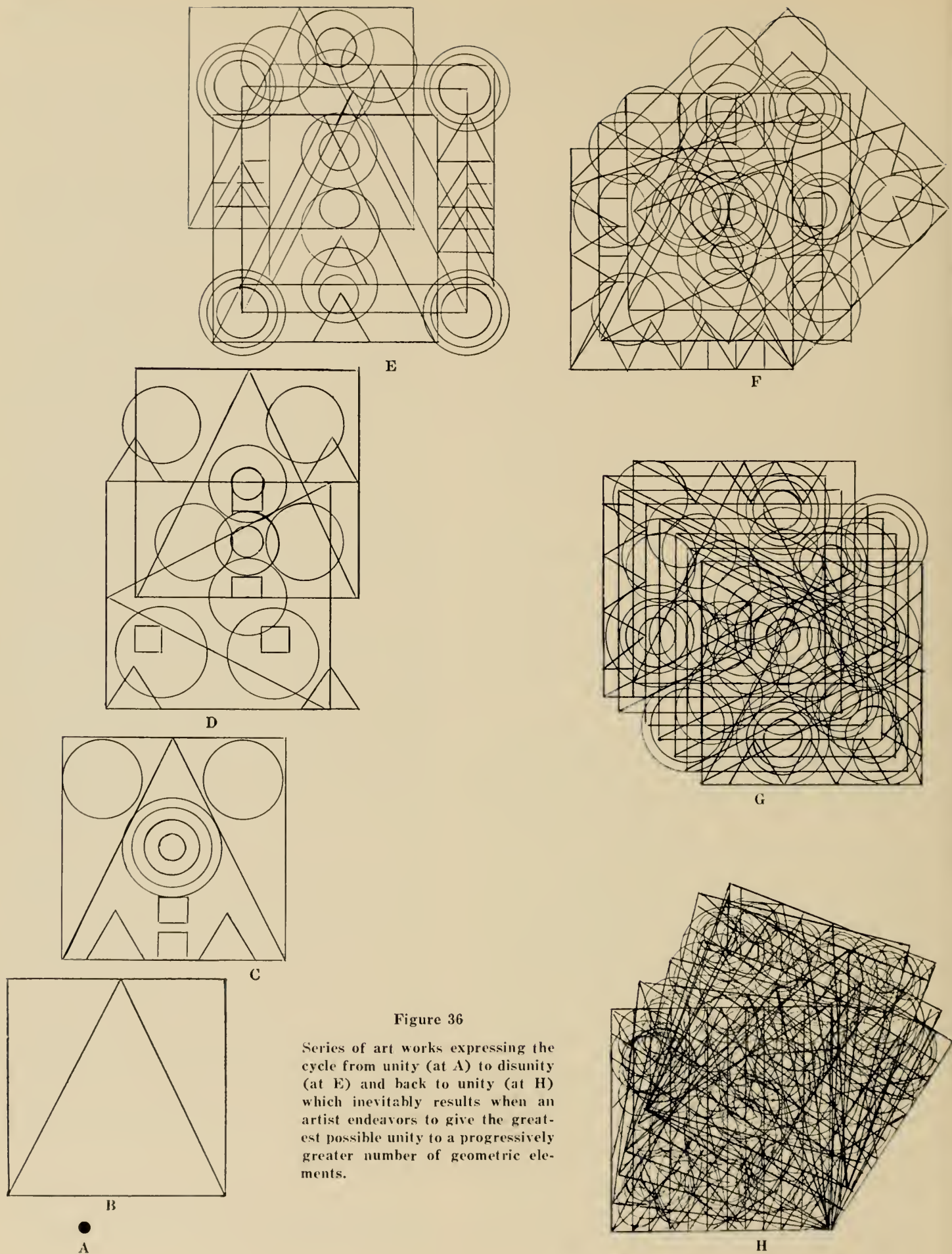


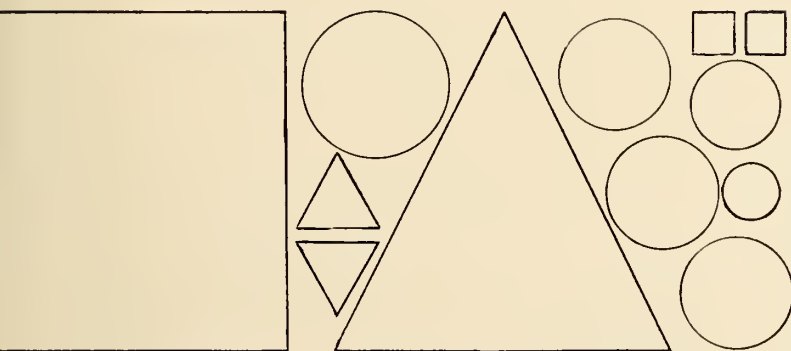
Figure 36

Series of art works expressing the cycle from unity (at A) to disunity (at E) and back to unity (at H) which inevitably results when an artist endeavors to give the greatest possible unity to a progressively greater number of geometric elements.

on them that he could. The method of making the jobs successively more difficult would be to require him to use a steadily increasing number of elements in producing them.

Art Work A, is based on the single element which marks the end of this sentence, a dot. And, of course, only one art work is conceivable from that element.

Art Work B is composed of two elements, a square and a triangle, and, although other "unifyings" are possible, the one Artist Jones created strikes me as being close to maximum unity for the two elements.



Next, let's present Jones with the twelve elements shown above. To give maximum unity to these is obviously more difficult. A wide excursion into disunity is possible with them* and even a travel "over the top" into confusion as shown in Figure 37. However, after a few experiments, Jones produces Art Work C, and I don't think it's a bad job. But let's continue.

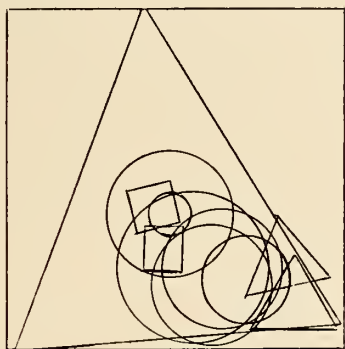


Figure 37

For Art Work D, Jones is given the same elements, but in double the quantities, making twenty-four in all.

For Art Work E the same elements are tripled, and so on for F, G and H.

The results of this procedure — and I hope you will agree — are as follows, I think.

First, it will be seen that the art works are in a cycle from unity (of order) up to disunity and back to unity (of confusion); and that the speed of tiring is in a corresponding cycle, from high speed of tiring to low speed of tiring and back to high speed of tiring.

*As I shall demonstrate later in connection with Figure 39 on Page 87.

Some artists might do a better job of it than others, and might consequently hold out longer before they got into the confusion represented by Art Work H, but they could only *postpone* their arrival there.

Second, it is plain that critics, under the necessity to require a certain definite degree of difficulty-of-doing as an antecedent to deciding how well-unified (or praiseworthy) any particular painting might be — under the principle of *Relative Unity* — would find themselves confronted with a very uncomfortable choice to make between two courses of action, both of them objectionable.

For them to give an award to Art Work B for *Relative Unity* (not *Absolute Unity*) would manifestly be ridiculous. A child could produce a hundred more "unified" ones.

Even at the level of C and D and E a large number of "facile" creations would be entering into competition with *Adoration of the Shepherds*, *Temptation of St. Anthony*, *The Sower*, *Guernica*, *Embarkation for Cythera* and — so far as unity was concerned — could easily walk away with the prize.

On the other hand, if critics should live up to their obligations and place their bottom line of difficulty-of-doing at a level corresponding, say, to Art Works F or G; they would find first, that they had excluded from art (as "too easy") so large a percentage of it (80 or 90 per cent, perhaps) that there was little or any of it left; and second, that what was left would be so complex and confused, and *fast tiring*, as to be almost unendurable except to super-highbrows.

But even this dilemma would not be their only or even their main embarrassment.

They would also discover that art — under their dogma of relative unity — would acquire an oppressive one-flavorism.

If you will examine the art works in the series you will see at once, I think, that what might be called *Unity-Obsession* obtrudes strongly from all of them. Of course the obsession is especially noticeable in this case because Artist Jones was confining himself to *geometric* elements. But no matter how wide an assortment of elements he chanced to employ, if his entire effort was devoted to giving them the greatest possible unity that effort is bound to show, just as does O. Henry's predilection for surprise endings, Klee's predilection for fantasy, Wouwerman's predilection for white horses or James Joyce's predilection for "word-music." These predilections are not necessarily bad; they are merely *constricting*.

In order to demonstrate this point let me now call in another artist, Robinson by name, who shares the opinions advocated in this book and regards Unity merely as an optional flavor (like "gaiety" or "sadness") of which he can use as strong or as weak a "snack" as suits him at the moment.

And then let's see what happens, for example, if we give him the same twelve elements that Jones used in Art Work C and allow him complete liberty to organize the elements as he sees fit *with no obligation at all as to unity*.

Whereupon he turns out the series of art works shown in Figure 39.

As to how far away from unity and how deep into disunity any particular one of them happens to travel is a matter for you to decide. The essential point, is that all of them are a denial of any virtue to unity and at least some of them are deliberate excursion *as far as possible into disunity*; done that way, *on purpose*.

This does not mean, of course, that Robinson threw caution to the winds, and arranged his elements haphazardly on mere impulse. Quite the contrary. His state of mind might be described as a "controlled freedom." The danger was always before him of "going too far" and sliding "over the top" of maximum disunity down towards the unity of confusion (as in Figure 37) where the speed of tiring would be too fast for practical purposes.

He would feel himself as operating, that is, in the unity-disunity cycle. But he would be there consciously, understandingly; and not subject at all to the stunning shock which Artist Jones may have felt when he discovered that the cycle was destroying his Utopia of Unity-as-a-Virtue.

As you study Robinson's creations, what I particularly hope you will notice (and I think you will) is that there is no sense of a *predominating flavor* among them except that which results from their all being made up from the same limited number of elements. You do not feel that they were all produced in accordance with some single (alleged) "eternal law" of art. In fact, you feel, definitely and strongly, that there is much more scope and range for art after you have *shaken off* the dogma of unity than there was before.

And with that realization in mind let me point out to you the startling fact that if heed were given to critics in their rhapsodies about unity — in their allegations that unity was the foundation of beauty, etc., etc., — then all this immense area of "disunity" would be forbidden ground and all the art works which belonged there (such as those in Figure 39) would be wrong, bad, atrocious, vile and disgusting and should be permanently and contemptuously banned from Art.

This is not necessarily an objection — any more than is the flavor which Chinese, or Japanese, or Egyptian, or Impressionistic, or Cubist, or Abstract Art acquires. It is an objection only when the flavor is accepted as necessarily either good or bad.

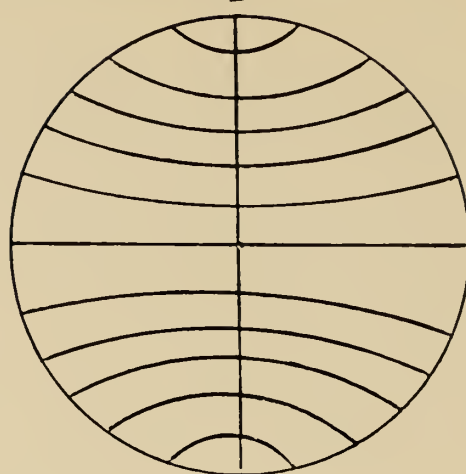
Although unity and disunity are completely neutral to beauty itself, an artist must keep his eyes more widely open, I think, when he is near unity. A lot more things can happen to him suddenly thereabouts than with disunity. With unity he's working with dynamite; with disunity only minor pressures are involved — not outright explosions.

But striving for unity is risky for another reason also — namely that it is a striving for a fixed end-point, rather than for an indefinite area.

To bring out my thought I ask you to visualize the general concept, Unity-Disunity, not as a single-track line but as a *sphere* (like the earth) with two poles — a north pole and a south pole.

Unity of Chaos

B



A

Unity of Order

Figure 38, The Unity Sphere

As shown in Figure 38, one pole of the sphere represents Unity of Order, and the other pole represents unity of Chaos.

But what I want you to notice is a difference in travel-effect, to the creative artist.

As he travels away from either pole towards disunity, he is traveling into a succession of *gradually expanding zones*, with more and more room for a wide variety of art flavors in any single zone the greater the distance of that zone from the pole. He would find maximum scope for a variety of flavors at the point of maximum disunity at the "equator."

As the artist travels towards unity the effect is just the opposite. His travel could be described as starting from a maximum of disunity (at the "equator") and passing through a succession of gradually contracting zones, with less and less room for a variety of flavors in any single zone as his travel brings him nearer and nearer to maximum unity (either of order or of chaos) at one or the other of the two poles.*

He's in a dead-end street.

And as another demonstration of the "poverty of flavor" to which an addict of unity-as-a-virtue would be subjected, let me say that whatever travel between the two poles he allowed himself would be a perpetual travelling along one road — as expressed by Line AB in Figure 9. All other roads between the poles would be "off-bounds", to him.

* * * * *

That completes what I have to say about *relative* unity, which I referred to, you will remember, as "Trick No. 1" to deceive you about critics.

Let's take another brief glance now at Trick No. 2, which consisted in claiming that the following "definition" (taken out of the dictionary) was

*And, of course, due to that narrowing of scope, the nearer to either pole an art work was placed the easier it would be to estimate that art work's degree of unity.

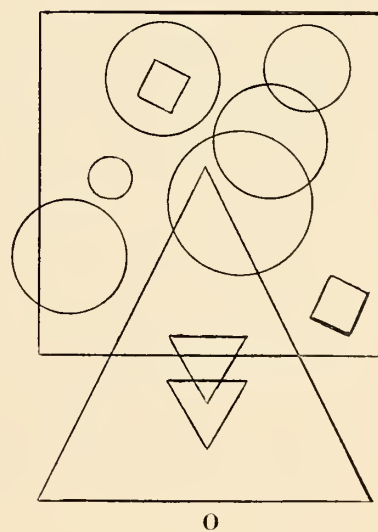
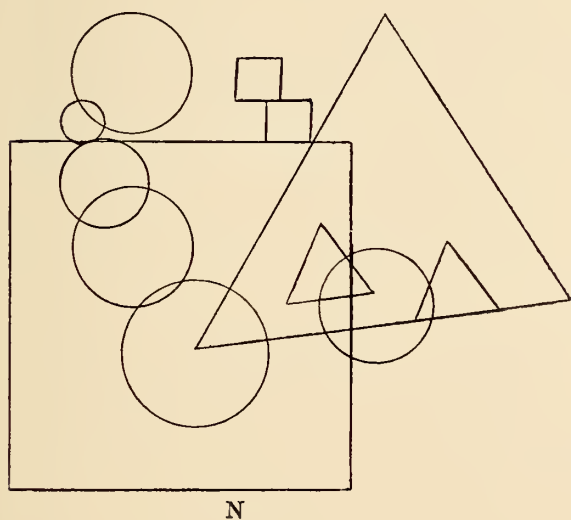
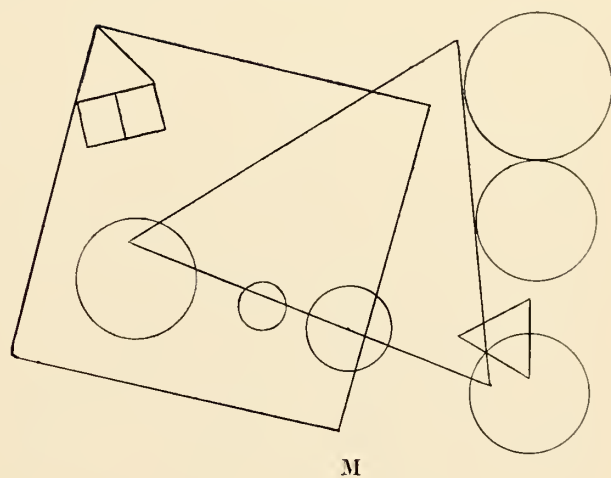
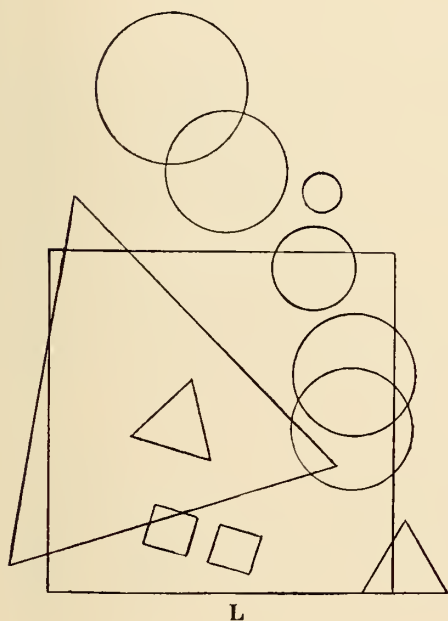
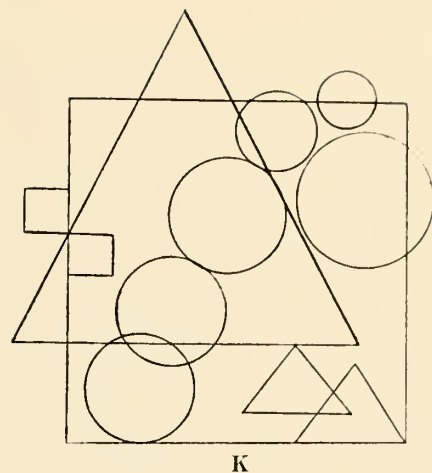
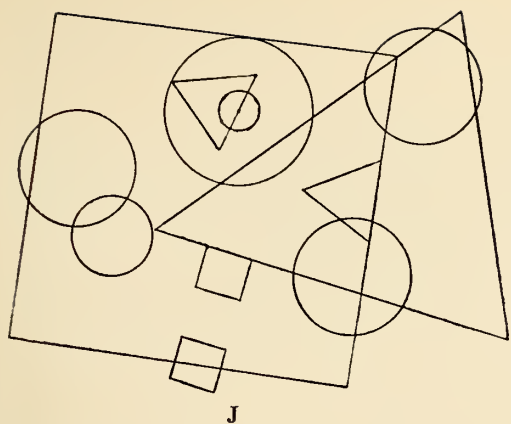


Figure 39

Series of art works expressing the unlimited opportunity for variety when the artist's objective is disunity without confusion. Compare with the rigidity and monotony when the artist's objective — as in Art Work C of Figure 36 — is to give the greatest unity possible to this same series of geometric elements.

truly a *definition* when actually it was nothing but a single very narrow formula (out of many possible ones) for disunifying so slowly and carefully that the process would not be noticed until it no longer made much difference.

"Combination into a homogeneous artistic whole, exhibiting oneness of purpose, thought, spirit and style with subordination of all parts to the general effect."

To bring out my point let's create the series of art works shown in Figure 40. At least the first five of them (and possibly all of them) seem to meet the dictionary "definition" of unity. Their theme or "general effect," we will say is "three spots" — or "threeness."^{*} It pervades all of them; and to my way of thinking, the other "requisites" of "unity" are also there. The point especially to bear in mind, however, is that no one of these art works can be appraised as possessing either more or less "unity" than the others because there is provision in the "definition" only for *absence* or *presence* of unity, not for *degrees* of unity.

As you move from left to right (in the cycle) from Art Work A, through B and C to D, you are advancing in complexity — the theme, "three spots", is being developed — very true, but "unity" supposedly remains constant. And moving from right to left — or simplifying — ends up the same way. This is bad enough, in itself. It hampers conversation. It reduces discussion almost to the vanishing point. Even to describe an art work as "*almost* unified" is not quite logical.

However, although admittedly it makes no difference to an art work's "unity" whether the theme is "developed" forwards (towards complexity) or backwards (towards simplicity) the "dictionary definition" of unity is usually employed as a means (or "recipe," as I term it) to develop *forwards* (towards complexity) without losing whatever "unity" the art work previously had. If, for example, Art Work D were simplified into Art Work C, the dictionary definition of unity would probably not be mentioned. It's only when the development is in the opposite direction as from Art Work C into D (or beyond) that critics feel the need to drag in the definition in order to impress on you that the unity has not been reduced at all, no matter how much your eye might tell you otherwise.

And of course, it's right here that the bluff and fakery of the whole idea is revealed, because the unity *has* been reduced. Any increase in complexity — any supplying you with more things to take notice of in an art work — necessarily and automatically must and does reduce unity.^{**}

In which connection let me present you what I think is a correct *definition of unity*.

"Unity, in an art work, consists in and is measured by, the speed and ease with which the mind can summarize it as a whole."

^{*}Which constitutes as legitimate a theme for an art work as are the imagined themes of "indecision" for *Hamlet* and "hollowness of fashionable life" for *Remembrance of Things Past*.

^{**}And simultaneously, of course, reduces speed of tiring.

There is room in it for *degrees* of unity (as there should be), it plays no favorites, and its basic — and essential — correspondence with speed of tiring is maintained.

Now, with this definition in mind, let's examine Art Work A in the series. You will agree, I think, that it can be summarized at the barest glance as "three spots," and nothing more; thus causing it to possess a high degree of unity.

Next, let's try some developing or complexifying of this basic theme, "three spots."

And first, let's insert three lines to connect the spots, as shown in Art Work B.

Among critics this is a very commendable procedure. Nothing pleases them more than "interlocking." It is a unifying force, they claim.

But actually, what does it do?

It slows up your summarizing.

Instead of your mind having — as before — the single concept "three spots" to take notice of, you now have something else to notice that wasn't there before, namely, connecting lines. The basic theme "threeness" is still there, no doubt, but certainly not any more strongly, and if anything more weakly.

Let's go on. In Art Work C we surround our "three spots" with that three-sided shape known as a triangle; we "interlock" the three spots with the apexes of the triangle, and insert (but well "subordinated") three new groups of three spots each.

Fine! All the conditions for a dictionary-defined unity are still there.

Next, we produce Art Works D, E, F and G, with the same principle in successful operation — successful, that is, to critics, and to such other persons as share the critics' determination to keep on loving a faked-up unity no matter what it does to their brains.

To a normal, fair-minded man, however, that's not the situation at all.

He sees at once that a continuous development and complexification of elements in this way, no matter how carefully controlled by a "unity-formula" cannot be held at any one degree of "unity." Instead, it is being controlled by the same cycle — of unity up to disunity and back to unity — that has made itself so strongly manifest on previous occasions. And conforming to this cycle is its ever-present auxiliary cycle, fast-tiring, slow-tiring, fast-tiring.

And as another bad effect which "*dictionary unity*" shares with relative unity is that art works created according to "*dictionary unity*" would acquire a one-flavorism at least as oppressive as did art works (see page 84) produced according to "*relative unity*."

* * * * *

From one point of view perhaps I should not complain of the strenuous — and sometimes frenzied — efforts of critics to graft a flashy meaning on unity and make it a quality which is *always good* — thus giving some validity to the popular notion that art is immortal.

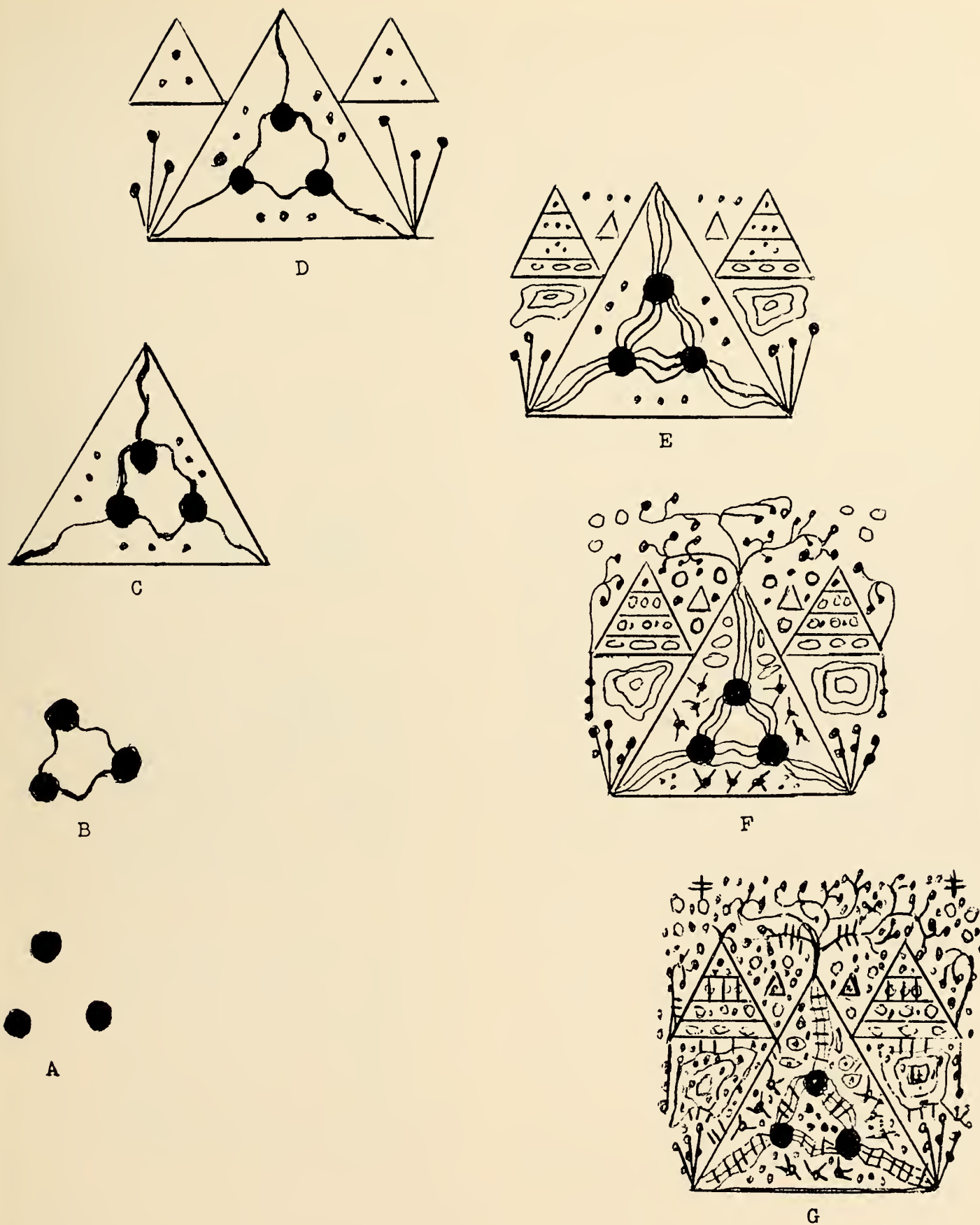


Figure 40

Series of art works created around the basic theme, "three spots" or "threeness". Under the dictionary definition of "unity" (see main text) all these art works would share the same "perfect unity".

The world needs a few idealists, fanatics and Ponce de Leons hunting enthusiastically for the "final answer" to everything, or for "basic truth." To eliminate them would tend to give art (and life) the limited flavor which I have strongly opposed throughout this book.

So by all means let them pursue their searches with all their present ardor.

Let them even announce that they have actually attained the sought-for goal — when they haven't. The objection is not so much to the humbuggery of it as to the excessive proportion of the earth's inhabitants which is taken in by it.

A scattering of easy marks subscribing to unity-as-a-virtue, denying the existence of fatigue, proclaiming the eternal beauty of this, that or the other art work is endurable — and perhaps supplies a needed relief from day to day humdrum.

But to my taste, any proportion of them in the population running over nine per cent, say, is way too much — and when we are definitely told (see a few paragraphs ahead) that actually the proportion of them runs as high as 82½ per cent, it very naturally raises the question of what the world is coming to.

So if you will spare me a few pages before I apply my theory of unity to more complex art works (instead of the simple ones so far offered) I would like to call your attention to the misconception which accounts, I think, for such a large proportion of naive and innocent people being around who don't realize how naive and innocent they really are.

The existence of their misconception is reported in Mr. Maitland Graves' book, *The Art of Color and Design*, wherein the betterness — in fact the *permanent* betterness — of certain designs over others is supposedly "proved" by submitting the designs to a vote.

Mr. Graves' method is to prepare a series of paired designs, one design in each pair being "unified" in accord with the principles he advocates and the other design not in accord with them. He then "establishes" the correctness of his principle by the large preponderance of persons who prefer the design which he declares to be the more "unified" of the two.

He reports his procedure for testing preferences in the following words:

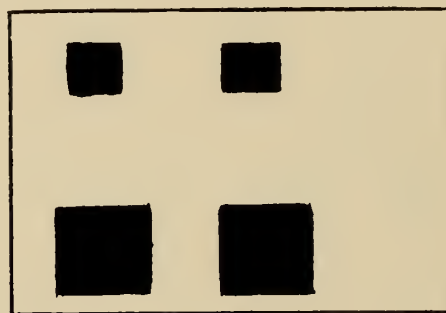
"Hundreds of art students in my classes . . . have taken this Design Test. Every one of the correct [note that word 'correct'] designs was preferred by the majority. Preferences for the correct design averaged 82½ per cent. . . . Many art instructors who have given the test to their design classes report approximately the same percentages of preference."

I do not dispute the correctness of these "preferences." There are many of them in life — the preference for the song of the nightingale over the caw of the crow, the preference for honey over mustard the preference for the chord on the harp over the blast on the tin horn.

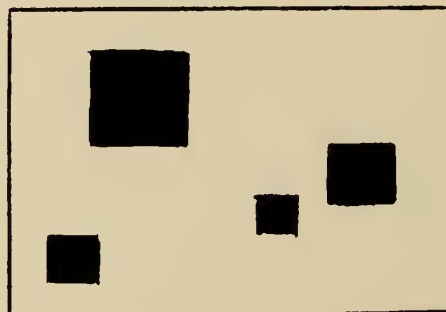
They are perhaps habitual and recurrent preferences, but they are not *permanent* preferences. Every one of them could be cancelled or even switched into reverse if men were willing to make the necessary effort. Curves are often praised as "more beautiful" than straight lines but a school of

painters who tried to found their art on that principle would wear their fellow-men into a nervous break-down with approximately the same speed as would a school of architecture based on the eternal betterness of the "golden rectangle"* — or as would, to repeat my earlier simile, an art of music composed entirely in waltz tempo.

I have no intention of attacking Mr. Graves' book — all the less so because it is so obviously a sincere and frequently effective work. I shall merely present to you some of his paired designs.** accompanied by his comments on them and ask you to decide whether the preference expressed for the correct one in each pair was due (as he claims) to its greater *unity* or was due (as I claim) to its greater *disunity*, to its greater range of "things to notice," to the more time required to "sum it up" and to its consequently lower speed of tiring.



UV



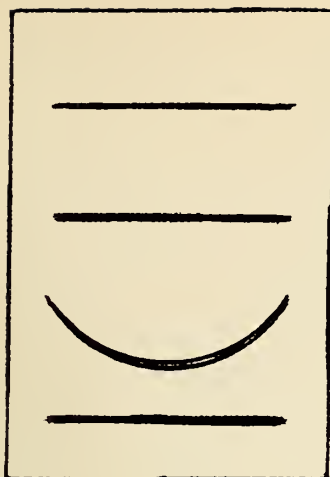
PK

"PK is right. Although both UV and PK are unified by the repetition of shape and value, PK is more unified than UV because of the dominant area, dominant area contrast, and dominant space interval. The variety produced by the unequal area contrasts, and unequal space intervals also make PK more interesting than UV."

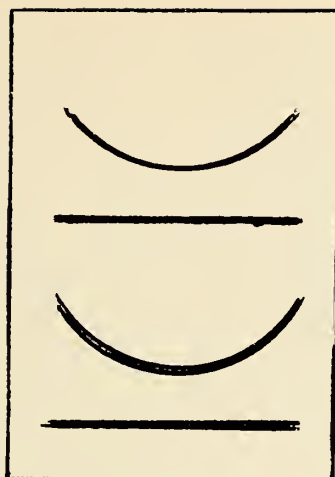
*Which, incidentally, is admired by Mr. Graves.

**Or at least close enough approximation to them so as not to be unfair to his contentions.

A cook-book in which all the recipes were evaluated according to their "goodness" (Sautéed Parsnips a shade better than Calvé Tarts; Larded Grouse far superior to Biscuit Tortoni) would be no more ridiculous than are most books about art.

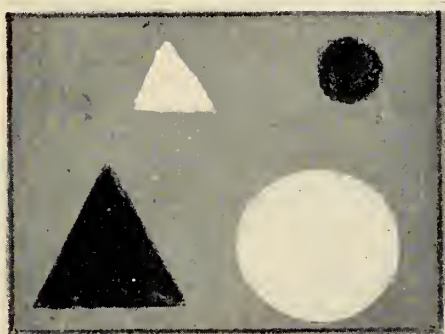


PX

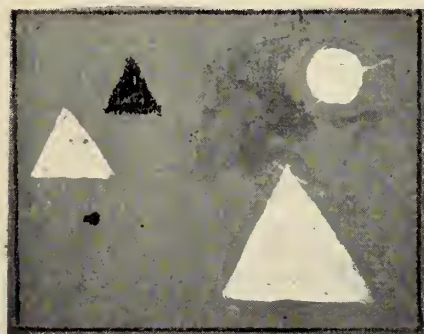


EF

"PX is the more coherent design because of the predominating straight lines. Of the hundreds of people who have taken this test, more than 90 per cent prefer PX to EF. It is interesting that by simply changing the bottom line of EF from curved to straight such a great change occurs that the popularity of the design increases about ten times. Inasmuch as the only difference between these two designs is that PX is unified by dominance and EF is not, it would seem that unity is immediately sensed and strongly desired by most people."*



TS



WX

"WX illustrates how unity is created by dominance of shape, measure, value and space interval. These are contrasting shapes, with the triangle dominant. One of the triangles is

also dominant in size. There is opposition of value, with the white predominating. WX is, therefore, unified. WX is more interesting than TS because of the variety produced by the unequal space between the units of WX."

As promised, I leave the verdict to you.

But let me call your attention to one other point, however — namely that when you call one of these designs "correct", and the others "incorrect" you are not merely placing a taboo against the single incorrect one, but against a hundred or more other ones which, if brought into the contest, would still be ruled by Mr. Graves as "wrong." Art, in other words, would soon be bossed and bullied into a state wherein there were perhaps a thousand things you were allowed to do and a million things you must *never* do.

* * * * *

In using, as I did, a series of very simple geometric elements to illustrate what Unity does to art, I was obviously making the problem as easy for myself as possible.

To apply the same method to what might be termed "museum-type" art works, such as we encounter on a visit to the Louvre, the Prado, the Uffizi or the Metropolitan, is manifestly much more difficult.

The same general principles are there, nevertheless; and the greater difficulty of applying them is due merely to man's backwardness — as is the greater difficulty of prognosticating the weather two *weeks* ahead instead of merely two *days* ahead.

So let's make the upward climb *gradually* — starting with a branch of "museum art" — *Portrait Painting* — which, though involving the employment of many more "elements" than the twelve I have been experimenting with, still uses far fewer of them than do most other branches of the painting art.

Once you have scraped away the heavy coating of sentimentality and extravaganza which critics have wrapped around portrait painting ("character revelation", "crystallizing the soul of man", "search for eternal truth" etc.), the rather surprising fact becomes clear, I think, that one of the hardest jobs which faces the creator of a portrait is to give it a little more disunity and complexity and a little less simplicity and unity than that which resides in "merely painting a face."

No matter how much finesse, insight and knowledge of human nature may be required in subtly picturing that "infinitely obscure" creature, man, there is not the range in the procedure that is available in a *Birth of Venus*, a *Last Supper*, a *Maids of Honor* or a *Raft of the Medusa*.

The artist is likely to find himself saying: "There! I've got the expressive (or cold) eyes, the lustrous (or dull) hair, the firm (or mobile) mouth, the delicate (or thick) nose, the weak (or strong) chin; where do I go from here?"

In no branch of art, I think, (except in the more geometric type of abstraction) can we more clearly see how ridiculous it is to define art as the reducing of chaos to order.

Order (and of course Unity as well) is what the portrait painter wants the least to have any more of. He's got too much of it already.

*No mention of speed of tiring, of course.



Bronzino

Ingres

And if you have difficulty, here, restraining the more exuberant and fervent segment of your nature — if you insist warmly that no “real artist” would feel himself thus constricted, you might be right — but not often.

Many a “great master”, I feel confident, has felt exactly that sense of limitation — has said to himself, plenty of times, “of course I could work in some more fine points here or there — give another slant to that eyebrow or a different twist to that mouth and so on — but I think there are better possibilities elsewhere.”

Whereupon — whether it is Velasquez, Sargent, Rembrandt, Degas or Copley — he begins to wonder where those better possibilities are. And there is no limit, of course, in the number of them that are available — including a lace collar, a bouquet of flowers, a jewelled dagger, fancy head-gear, handsome furniture (e.g. Mme. Récamier’s sofa), pictures on the wall, a pet dog or cat, or a broad panorama glimpsed out the window.

And let me emphasize that no matter how closely these subsidiary effects are tied to the subject of the portrait (a book to a bookish man or woman, a background of his own manor to the lord of the manor) their effect is about eighty per cent to disunify against twenty per cent to unify.

In which connection I call your attention to two portraits by Bronzino and Ingres, shown opposite, with the variants I have made of them by removing, changing or inserting backgrounds.

I shall not attempt to guess which format of each portrait you will like best, nor to force on you my individual estimate of their degrees of unity. But I think you may find it very difficult always to love most (as supposedly you should) that one which (by your guess) possesses the greater unity.

* * * * *

After this introductory study of portraiture, let’s move on to “museum art” in its fullest sense. And let me point out here that until the last few decades (that is, before abstract art gained its popularity) all such paintings (regardless of critics’ allegations to the contrary) were deep in disunity.

It’s only recently that pictures which (in my opinion) deliver their total message in one word — or at most one sentence — have been allowed entrance. I make this comment not as a complaint. Quick-tiring pictures have their place in art just as have the slow-tiring. I merely express some doubt whether that place is in a museum — so long, at least, as the museum is conducted in the rather haughty and high-hat mood that prevails in it nowadays. They would be more at home in an institution with a bit more of the circulating-library touch.

The picture which I have selected for illustrative purposes here is Giorgione’s *The Tempest*, reproduced in Figure 41. It is especially relevant in this connection not only because all critics adore it but because it has been specifically praised as being “perfectly unified,” in the following comment by Mr. John Canaday from the Metropolitan Museum’s *Seminars in Art*:



Figure 41, *The Tempest*, Giorgione

“It is beautifully composed; its individual elements are in themselves quite irrational and contradictory, yet they are integrated into a perfectly unified whole. . . . It is their unification as forms in light and their harmony as sensuous experiences that lift this collection of miscellaneous and itemizable objects to the level of an experience not to be explained in terms of the world.”

Perfectly unified!!

It’s a strong assertion; and presumably would indicate that few, if any, changes can be made in it without marring its perfection.

Nobody would be more amused by such a statement, I believe, than Giorgione himself — who, while still in the midst of a good laugh at the idea — could make a dozen changes in the picture without affecting its unity by an iota.

Revamping the cloud formations, substituting mountains for some or all of the houses, putting a second veranda on the house at right, adding or subtracting a pier from the bridge, altering the foliage-contours of the trees — any one of these (or even all of them together) wouldn’t necessarily make an atom of difference.

This is not to say that the picture’s degree of unity (no matter what definition of unity you choose to adopt) is invulnerable. Quite the contrary. Any one of a myriad devices could be used to make minor or major (and sometimes fatal*) changes in that unity.

*Fatal, that is, for “museum art”, wherein a certain minimum resistance to reiteration would seem essential.

Now, as I present to you, in adjoining pages, an assortment of variants on *The Tempest*, allow me to remind you that my estimates of what changes they cause in the unity of the painting are merely the best guesses I know how to make. Some of them seem to me indubitable, others are open to argument.

And allow me to remind you, also, that throughout this endeavor I am operating *inside* the cycle, unity-disunity-unity, as pictured at the right. This means that if, for example, I am discussing a picture (at B) I can increase its unity by moving in *either one* of two directions. I can increase its unity "leftwards," by making it *easier* to understand, or I can increase its unity "rightwards," by putting more "confusion" into it, and thus gradually making it so hard to understand that the observer stops even trying.

To visualize this process, I suggest you look back to Figure 36 on Page 84. If you assume that Art Work E correctly represents the high point in disunity in this series, then starting from Art Work E, Art Works D, C, B and A are steps leftwards toward unity of *order* and Art Works F, G and H are steps "rightwards" towards unity of confusion.

Let's try the same system on *The Tempest*, beginning first with a leftward move towards unity of order and easiness of understanding. It's not hard to make. The presence of the man in the picture and of the lightning flash in the sky have been described by Mr. Canaday (and by other critics) as "irrational and contradictory," so we eliminate them both.

By doing so — as shown in Variant A — we have — under almost any definition of unity — and especially under mine (easiness of summing up) given substantially greater unity to the art work. It's less obscure.

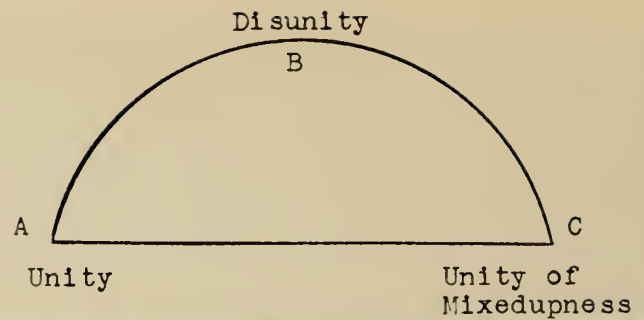
Not only that, but this change gives us the right to take another unifying action — namely to abandon the old (and admittedly ambiguous) title, *The Tempest*, and adopt a new one, *Motherhood in a Serene World*, which plainly causes the picture to fit much more neatly than before into the dictionary definition* of unity as consisting of oneness of purpose and subordination of all parts to the general effect, etc.

There you have unification by movement "leftwards" towards unity of order.

Let's give our attention now to movement "rightwards" towards unity of confusion.

And the first question is: has *The Tempest* attained the high point of disunity; or could we conceivably make changes in it which would increase its disunity still more, without sliding "over the top" towards unity of confusion. My answer is that it has *not* reached the high point of disunity and that changes *could* be made in it that would increase the disunity.

*Whose real purpose — as I showed you in this chapter — is merely to provide the namby-pamby type artist a safe way to disunify and still think he is unifying.



Variant A

The method (out of the million available) which I propose to use is to "develop" the original title, *The Tempest*, into a new title, *Unseen Perils of Life*.

The seed or motif for this new title has always been present in the lightning flash and storm clouds but the lack of supporting elements in the rest of the picture reduced it to negligible force.

So we reinforce the motif by inserting a venomous snake in the lower right-hand corner — as shown in Variant B.

Disunity is thus increased (1) by bringing in a new element, the snake, and (2) by giving substance to the new factor of "unseen perils" which, though there before, was almost imperceptible.

Encouraged by our success, we go further and place a dagger (clandestinely) in the man's right hand, invisible to the poor mother who is unknowingly threatened from three directions, as shown in Variant C.

Still more disunity, obviously, still more things to notice and take an interest in!



Variant B



Variant C

Having reached this level of disunity the question arises how can we raise it still more.

One way, obviously, would be merely to crowd in more “perils”, such as a tiger lurking in the tree branches, or “Sin” and “Disease” (personified) approaching down the road.

Actually, however — and I am speaking now from *my* concept of unity and of disunity — there is a limit as to how far this procedure of piling on perils can still count as “disunifying.”

Eventually your “new things to notice” will become so mixed up and confused (as for example in art work G of Figure 40, page 89) that the visual effort of looking for them becomes too much bother and you have come uncomfortably close to unity of confusion.

Another method* of disunifying is available, however.

Giorgione, if we can imagine him as pondering the problem, might say to himself, “That’s enough about perils, let’s try something new.

Whereupon he introduces a man ploughing a field; or a miser counting his gold or a horse race — or anything that occurs to him as having good prospects.

*Or rather a myriad methods. For example, the picture might be renamed *Infancy of . . .*; and we could then imagine the man standing at the left being in the presence, without his knowing it, of the male child who would grow up to murder him, or the female child destined to be his bride.

And any one of these additions — or all of them — could conceivably be successful — subject, of course, to the risk, as before, of skidding “over the top” and lapsing towards unity of confusion.

Now perhaps you will bring up the point here that all Giorgione would thus accomplish would be to change his theme. Instead of *Unseen Perils of Life*, his theme would be *Life Must Go On In Spite of Its Perils*, or *Man, Be Brave*, in relation to which new titles, all the parts would be as well “subordinated to the general theme,” as they had been before.

Very true; but it’s disunifying, nevertheless. The disunifying happens to have been accomplished by disunifying the motif and thus having more scope to introduce new elements to which the observer can give his attention, and which supposedly *belong* to that motif.

But it doesn’t alter the fact that what has taken place is a process of disunifying (and giving the observer more things to see) instead of a process of unifying (and giving the observer fewer things to see). The disunifying has simply been done skillfully and without bringing in excessive confusion, but that’s all. To pretend otherwise is just a mental self-cheating under which you could actually escape every conceivable accusation of disunity by claiming a more and more elaborated (or disunited) original motif until you ended up with the ultimate motif, “Man’s Existence on Earth,” of which every elaboration, no matter how seemingly incongruous, could conceivably be justified as an elaboration possessing perfect unity, if you knew how to make the connection.



Variant D

This does not imply, obviously, that the process of disunifying can be carried on indefinitely (before we move into confusion) nor does it mean that any art work exists which has been so much disunified that nothing (no matter how insignificant) could be added to it without carrying it "over the top" towards unity of confusion. Maximum heights (or peaks) of disunity could not be fixed with that degree of accuracy even if all men were exact duplicates of each other.

Nevertheless, approximations are possible; and I do not think it would be unfair to say that there is more scope for disunifying in Variant A of *The Tempest* than in Variant C.

Consequently in our effort to show what happens to *The Tempest* in moving "rightwards" toward unity of confusion let's take it for granted that Variant C comes fairly close to being at the high point of disunity and then let's add to the picture a large enough number of new elements, and give them sufficient force, so that there won't be any doubt that the movement rightwards towards unity of confusion has been accomplished.

We trust you will agree that Variant D — despite its being created by a process of mere patching — is a fairly successful achievement of the task.

If you remind us that Giorgione could take these same elements and rearrange them in a way that would substantially reduce the confusion, our answer would be simply to force on him more and more elements until — since we have "all the elements in the world" to draw from — he eventually, "being a mortal, not a god," must admit defeat, and end up in confusion.

Variant E represents a further excursion towards the Unity of Confusion, although there is still room in it for more.

I do not wish to suggest by this that confusion is necessarily "bad." It's merely a flavor, as are also the colors in the spectrum. Without an occasional spice of it — as in a painting by Chagall or a play by Pirandello — something useful would be left out of art.

Turn of the Screw, *Wuthering Heights* and *Ulysses* undoubtedly derive some of their attraction from the fact that the reader — at least in some passages — cannot make out what is happening.

A million ways exist by which an artist can manipulate unity. He can exaggerate it or moderate it; he can mix it in strongly in one section of his art work, weakly elsewhere; he can be precise today, just the opposite, tomorrow; but in the end all he has done is increase or decrease speed of tiring with no necessary advantage either way.

This attitude of neutrality, however, does not prevent him from keeping his eyes open. If he sees that his fellow-men (misled by critics or by their own prejudices) are over-stressing one degree of unity — in the belief that it is the correct degree — or skimping another degree — in the belief that it is the incorrect degree, and are thus throwing their own fatigue patterns out of balance, he can — and very rightly — endeavor to correct that situation.



Variant E

The pioneering artist who breaks out into hitherto unexplored territory confers a benefit on humanity, undoubtedly, but so does the artist who rescues his colleagues from a taboo which, unknown to them, had been constricting their efforts.

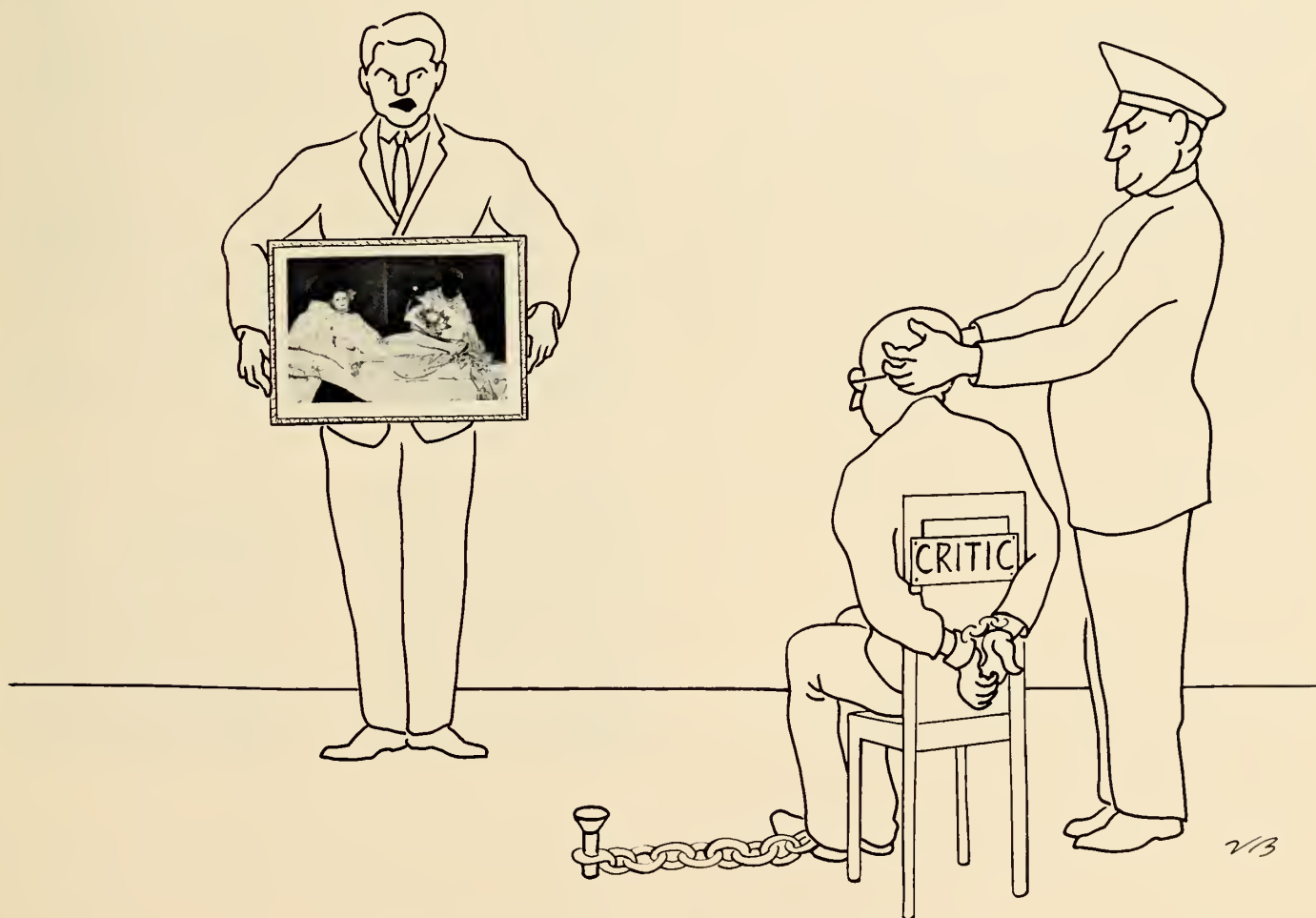
Now if you are convinced that there must be a quibble in this somewhere and are straining your mind to discover its location, let me help you out by asserting that it isn't there. What I have said is simply a recognition of the fact that if such a thing as an inexhaustible (or eternally beautiful) art work existed then the "punishment" which I have prescribed for the deluded critic, as shown in the

cartoon, would, instead, be the conferring on him of perpetual happiness. I trust you will agree with me that no such happy outcome would eventuate for him.

* * * * *

Well, that's my effort to convince you of the fraudulence of Unity-as-a-Virtue. If I have failed, then all that remains is for me to congratulate you on your capacity to be faithful to what you believe in, however irrational.

If I have succeeded, let me welcome you to membership in an exceedingly small, but, I hope, growing club.



"Hold his head straight and don't let him close his eyes."

NOTE: Above illustrates proper treatment for critic who has been caught a second time declaring an art work is inexhaustible, immortal, or imperishable. Milder treatment for a first offence is shown in Chapter I.

Chapter X

Estimating Speeds of Tiring*

The ambition of every honest critic, as he tries to explain why a certain art work is "good" or "bad", is to explain it by some quality that *definitely belongs to and comes out of* the art work itself and not out of his own accidental mood of the moment. Otherwise, since there are a million moods in and out of which he (and everybody else) is fluctuating from day to day, his verdict may be exclusively his own or — at best — may be applicable (and, mostly by chance) to a bare one, three or six men in a thousand — thus becoming of negligible importance.

In my opinion there is only one attribute of an art work which is sufficiently the art work's *own property* to justify a critic's using that attribute for delivering a verdict that will have a reasonable chance of being sound — namely the art work's speed of tiring, or complexity.

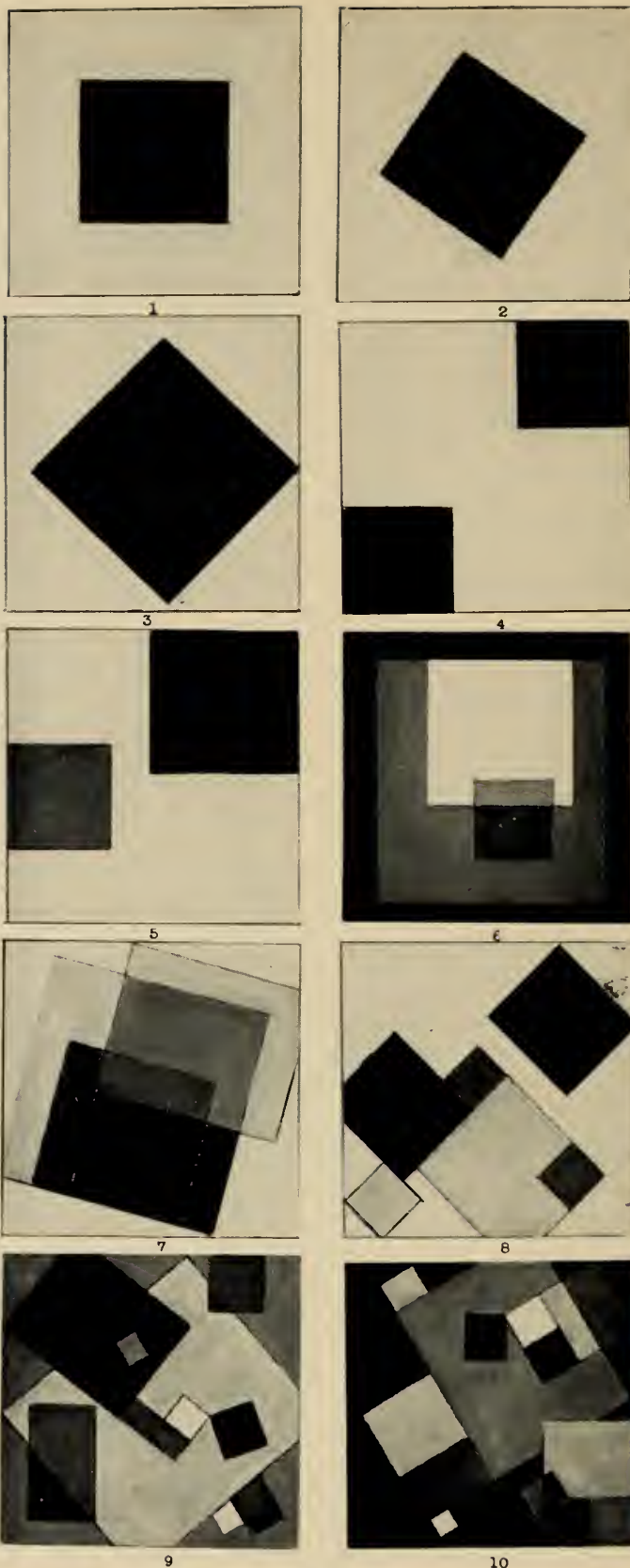
All other attributes of an art work — unity (!), rhythm, truth, harmony and so on are complete irrelevancies except to whatever extent speed of tiring is present within them. Contrast one unity with another, set two rhythms or two harmonies side by side, and — regardless of how much more unity, rhythm or harmony one of them may possess than the other — no appraisal of merit is warranted through these qualities alone.

Use speed of tiring as your sole criterion, however, and enough validity can be given to your verdicts, I believe, to justify their promulgation.

As confirmation of this assertion I make the claim that it would be possible to take any group of five thousand adult men and — after a brief investigation of their education — divide them into five sub-groups of one thousand, in each of which sub-groups there would be a 75 to 85 per cent conformity as to how fast they would become tired of certain art works.

Which is not bad at all in so "psychological" an activity as criticism. And is enough, I believe, to justify the allegation that an art work's speed of tiring comes decidedly *more* out of the art work's own nature than it does out of the observing man's character and temperament. In other words, speed of tiring is *more objective* than subjective; and it is the only quality applicable to the appraisal of an art work of which this can be said.

A man's eyes and ears are purely mechanical organs of the body, intended to transfer to his brain



*Portions of this chapter have been transcribed from an earlier work of the author.

— and without prejudice — whatever they see or hear. There is a very decided limit to the amount of cheating he can force them to do in order to increase the attraction to him of the art work they perceive or to alter what might be termed its “natural” speed of tiring.

He cannot make them his slaves in the pursuit of pleasure.

For example, examine the ten art works (repeated from a previous page) which I show you opposite.

Allowing me, as above mentioned, reasonable latitude, I would have no difficulty, I believe, in choosing a group of one thousand persons who would be in at least 75 per cent agreement with me that these art works possessed a progressively lower speed of tiring.

Furthermore, no matter how rigorously I forced the perception of these art works on the members of the group, their agreement as to speeds of tiring would not thereby be much altered. The percentages of agreement would stand up because they were the result of what the art works themselves did.

Contrast this with the reaction of the same thousand individuals to the *beauty* or *pleasurability* of the same art work.

Even after making due allowance for the fact that speeds of tiring (like loaded dice, and according to the degree of that “loading”) tend to hold the pleasurability of art works in the same relation as their speeds of tiring (to what might be called a “norm,” that is) there would be decidedly greater deviation from that “norm” in men’s beauty appraisals of them than there had been in men’s appraisals of their speeds of tiring. And these deviations would themselves vary with the lapse of time.

That is to say, speed of tiring, although it may remain a constant pressure in one direction, is not powerful enough to “keep beauty in line with it.” That would be true even under so-called normal

circumstances, in the ordinary ups and downs of life. And if I had the privilege of manipulating the men’s modes of life, at will — if I could bring into their perceptions any art works I desired, and at any intensities — then I would be able to revamp their beauty-appraisals (but not their speed-of-tiring-appraisals) into any pattern I desired — no matter how contrary it was to their previous patterns.

To take an extreme case, it would be possible (though difficult) to force Art Work #6 so persistently on an observer that Art Work #1 — a plain black square — would momentarily be a pleasurable relief.

In other words, assuming you confine yourself to groups of men possessing a reasonable similarity of culture, an art work’s speed of tiring (or complexity) in relation to each such group has a much stronger tendency to remain constant than does its beauty or pleasurability.

Now, having made that statement (and without withdrawing it), let’s consider how an art work’s complexity (or speed of tiring) even if constant for men of similar culture — can and does vary as we bring it to the perception of men of *varying* degrees of culture.

I think I can best demonstrate what happens by calling your attention to Diagram #1, which is supposed to be a picturing of man’s continuous climb towards complexity or intelligence. The vertical line PY is an abbreviated expression of this upward progression.

L1, L2, L3, L4, etc., represent various levels of complexity; and at each one of these levels I have listed an assortment of art works which I regard as belonging at those levels on the basis of their complexity — and consequent speed of tiring. And let me emphasize that I am not taking an inflexible stand as regards my correctness in estimating the complexity or speeds of tiring in the art works listed. You are quite at liberty to substitute your own art works for any or all that I have selected and whatever changes you make will not invalidate, I believe, any of the conclusions at which I arrive.

Fight That Inferiority Complex

If, in contemplating a painting, you are sometimes depressed at your tendency to allow seemingly trivial factors to draw your attention away from the “deeper beauties” supposedly there, your depression may be relieved by reading the following “confessions”.

Dali is without question the most irritating painter who has ever deliberately cultivated a public personality through buffooneries. . . . Eventually it may be possible to look again at a painting by Dali as a painting rather than as a sensational news-piece. At the moment it is difficult to evaluate him objectively, he has made it impossible to separate the private world of his painting from his public personality. John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

“In spite of an undeniable ingenuity in staging, Dali’s work, hampered by an ultra-retrograde technique (return to Meissonier) and discredited by a cynical indifference to the means he used to put himself forward, has for a long time shown signs of panic, and has only been able to give the appearance of weathering the storm through a process of systematic vulgarization”. Sir Herbert Read, in *A Concise History of Modern Art*.

Really amazing, I think!

A pair of professional critics, of long experience, who still find themselves unable to contemplate an art work in its own identity, separately from the personality of the man who created it.

Let us consider the effect of living in such a world on three men, as follows:

Man A, of low intelligence, and consequently low capacity to advance in complexity, represented in the diagram by Shape A.

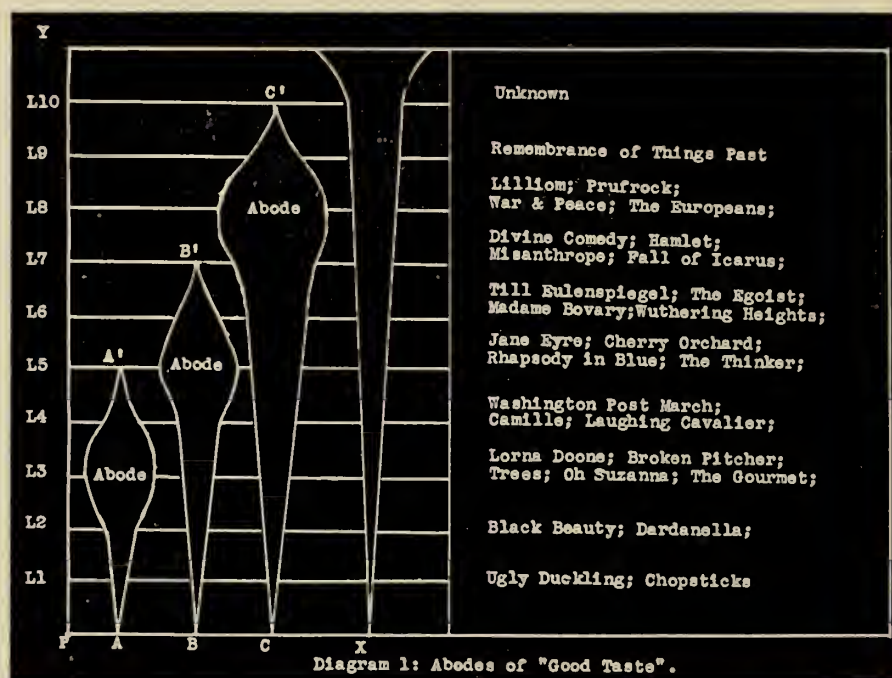
Man B, of medium intelligence, and medium capacity to advance in complexity, represented in the diagram by Shape B.

Man C, of high intelligence and high capacity to advance in complexity, represented in the diagram by Shape C.

All three of these men will be imagined for the moment as static. That is to say, they are (while we talk about them) maintaining unchanged their present ability to "understand" art works.

Greuze's *Broken Pitcher*. Among these art works he is most richly expressing himself, pleased and interested by a (*to him*) wide assortment of new and interesting emotions. And they possess therefore a *slow speed of tiring*, with the result, of course, that he prefers to pass most of his time at this level — which I shall therefore call his aesthetic "abode" — and I have indicated this idea by giving his shape its greatest width at that level — reflecting the greater time spent there.

This does not mean, however, that he remains at this "abode" continuously. For obviously one result of his remaining there is that he forgets the art works at lower levels (e.g., *Black Beauty*, and *Chopsticks*) and gradually builds up a desire for them once more — which he satisfies by occasional downward excursions. On account of the greater sim-



It must be remembered that these men as they advance upwards through the various levels of complexity do not feel a steady increase in complexity as we (supposedly) more intelligent individuals do. They feel that increase only as far as their capacity to perceive complexity carries them, and above that point they feel that the art works are *declining* rather than *increasing* in complexity, because these art works, being above their ability to understand, become more and more like that very simple (and not complex) feeling of mere confusion.

This means, if you will remember the diagrams I showed you in the last chapter, that the men are passing through *cycles*, from simplicity of understoodness, up to maximum complexity, and then back to the simplicity of confusion. And how far up they travel in complexity before they start to fall off to simplicity depends on their individual mental capacities.

Man A, whom I am representing in "Shape" A feels an advance in complexity only as far as Level 3, where are located *Lorna Doone*, *Oh Suzanna*, and

plicity of these art works at lower levels, he tires of them quickly, however, and consequently goes back again very soon to his "abode." Nevertheless, this mode of life, even when varied by occasional excursions downward, proves to be not enough; and when he comes to realize this fact he feels the need for supplementing it and enlarging his domain by advances upwards into further complexity — the existence of this domain of higher complexity having been revealed to him, perhaps, by other persons — or even by critics when (if ever) they learn to operate in their proper function as aesthetic physicians, instead of as all-knowing oracles.

There is ample scope for him to do so, obviously — in any one of a thousand fields — from learning to play the piano or from research work on baroque architecture to collecting stamps or reading the "classics." Of course, as soon as Man A makes these upward ventures he finds (just as in his downward excursions) that he is running into what are *to him*, high simplicities. They are simplicities of confusion, however, and of not-understoodness, whereas in his downward travels they were simplicities of already-knowing or understoodness. But

it makes no difference in relation to fatigue. It is still simplicity — even if it possesses a different flavor — and the art works there have the same high speeds of tiring.

Man A, in experiencing them, merely gets little inklings of their complexity; the sensation being much more a mere struggle to comprehend, accompanied only rarely by the gratification of succeeding. With the result as before, that the visits must be short, with frequent returns to his “abode” for a vacation and to gain strength for a new excursion. As already said, his diagram is widest at his aesthetic “abode” where most of his time is passed, tapers off downwards to zero complexity — where the most primitive emotions are felt — and tapers off upwards to a summit at A’, where the most complex art works are of which he obtained the barest clues of their meaning, but where the possibilities for the future are the greatest.

The same principles apply to Men B and C, the only difference being that their better brains (or better educational opportunities) enabled them to move up higher and learn to understand more complex art works. They would make similar and occasional visits downwards to savor again art works which possessed high speeds of tiring but had regained pleurability from abstention, or from having unaccountably been missed when they previously occupied abodes in the district. And they would similarly make raids into the upper levels when their desires to expand their areas of knowledge had gained sufficient force (from the monotony of their customary surroundings) so that they were compelled to make the effort.

It should be noted, however, that no matter how widely separated any two men may be by their respective mental powers, it is possible that a certain art work can possess for both of them the same degree of complexity and consequently the same speed of tiring. All the art works at Level 4, for instance, might possess an equal complexity and equal speed of tiring for both Man A and Man C, as indicated by the fact that their shapes have the same width at this level; and both men therefore would give approximately an equal amount of their time to art works situated there. They would do so in a different mood, however. In perceiving *Washington Post March*, Man A would perceive it with a sense of moving upwards and learning something, whereas Man C would listen to it with a certain condescension, saying to himself “good old *Washington Post March*, it’s fun once in a while.”

There is nothing queer in such a phenomenon. We see examples of it every day. The only thing that is queer is that critics don’t want to give heed to the factors which it introduces into art.

One of these is that today’s most complex man in the world is exactly that — today’s most complex man in the world, and nothing more. In relation to next decade’s most complex man (Superman X, for example, whom you will find suggested in Shape X), he ranges from a greenhorn to an utter ignoramus, depending on how far ahead you choose to look.*

*And parenthetically let me remind you — lest your visualizing of man’s future be too inhibited — that astronomers have discovered a single star whose diameter is 2500 million miles and of sufficient size to encompass the Sun and all its planets, including Earth.

To Superman X, the notion that *War and Peace* (if we can imagine him as having so much as heard of it) was so “good” that it was immortal and would endure forever, might supply one of the heartiest laughs of his existence, even exceeding, perhaps, Man C’s somewhat snobbish amusement at Man A’s enthusiasm for *Trees*, or for Picasso’s *The Gourmet*.**

And I ask that you do not remind me that many men of earlier eras — such as Homer, Aristotle, or Confucius — were just as complex as are men of today. I doubt its accuracy even when I allow you to select these exceptional men as your examples. I feel sure that half an hour’s conversation with any one of the three would reveal lapses of intelligence (by our standards) which would amaze you. Progress toward complexity may be slow; it may be measurable only over the centuries, but that does not make it the less important.

And let us remember, also, that degrees of man’s complexity (or mental development) are dependent not only upon historical age (by eras), but also on the mere accident of his longevity. In which connection I risk the following two assertions.

1. If all the men in the world possessed the excellent mental capacity which I have attributed to Man C above; and if their life spans were reduced from what they are now to a mere thirty years, say, their evaluations of the “goodness” (or complexity) of art works would, in spite of their high intelligence, be radically altered, and would conform much more closely to those I have ascribed to the much less intelligent Man A.

2. If the life spans of these same men were extended to one hundred and fifty years, the evaluations of “goodness” (or “complexity”) which they had made in their youth (when they were only eighty, say) would produce merely an amused and indulgent chuckle.

In other words, appraisals of “goodness” (or complexity) are dependent also upon the mere chance of how long men live and how much time they have to cultivate their intellectual capacities.

Just now, the appraisals we are getting would be described as those of the sixty-year-old man of the middle twentieth century. The appraisals we might be imagined as getting, in the fiftieth century, from the ninety-year-old man (with a life-expectancy of one hundred years) would be so different as to be unrecognizable. Have I any proof of this statement? Manifestly not. But it strikes me as a good guess with a much better chance of proving correct than the guesses critics issue so liberally as to what art works are or are not immortal.

I am emphasizing this point because it is so widely assumed that the degree of intelligence which is required to understand an art work is in some way a measure of its “goodness.” Such a notion is largely the result of (1) man’s vanity and (2) his tendency — already mentioned — to hole up in his own cultural “abode” and fossilize there. The ordinary fellow, as he observes himself under-

**Which — in case you are wondering what’s wrong with it — is (to employ absolutist jargon) much “too cute” and tends inartistically close to “subject dominance.”

standing and enjoying some complex art work whose "beauty" his fellows are completely blind to, experiences such an ecstasy at his own superior attainment that a portion of that ecstasy attaches itself (symbolically) to the art work. It is impossible to convince him, apparently, that there is nothing radically different about what he feels than what he felt at the age of six — when his mother first read to him *The Ugly Duckling* or *Hiawatha* — except that his own intellectual youth was then too obvious to be ignored whereas now that he is "adult" he is able to make himself believe that he has soared to a height of culture which is miraculous and will never again be approached by anybody else.

Intellectuality is a complete failure as a test of "goodness" in art, for the reason that it has no upper limit. After all, how is it possible for us to declare any art work to be intelligent (except temporarily), when one of the main objectives of our lives is always to advance further and further in intelligence and consequently to cause that which we once thought to be "intelligent" to seem less and less so?*

* * * * *

Yes, there is no denying that variations in men's cultures cause corresponding variations in their judgments of the speeds of tiring of art works.

Plenty of room is still left, however, for the selection of groups of men who would be in substantial agreement as to the relative speeds of tiring of certain art works provided you used care in selecting those art works and did not push your luck too far.

For, as you will see by examining the diagram, even if you selected your group of men almost at random, and the group was composed indiscriminately of A-type, B-type and C-type men they would still agree — despite their wide variations in culture — as to the relative speeds of tiring of all art works at Levels 1 and 2. To all of them, *Dardanella* would have a lower speed of tiring than *Chopsticks*, because the abodes of all of them were above the level of those two art works.

And better still, if you could confine your group to C-type men (and it shouldn't be too hard) all of whom had their "abode" at Level 8, then all art works below that level would have progressively higher and higher speeds of tiring — the art works at Level 7 would have a higher speed of tiring than those of Level 8, the art works at Level 6 would

have a higher speed of tiring than those at Level 7 and so on all the way down — which gives you quite a scope within which to operate.

Now let me urge you not to reject all this on the ground that it is "too neat."

That seeming neatness is merely due to the fact that I have neither the time nor the space to delve into all the complications which a more searching study would bring out. For example, it is obvious, I think, that it would be extremely unlikely that such an individual as Man C — possessing a supposedly "even" progression to complexity in the three arts, literature, painting and music — would exist. He would more probably be at a *different* level of complexity in each art — at Level 8 in one art, at Level 4 in another; and so on. It is not too difficult to imagine the changes in speed of tiring which would result from this unevenness. What I have tried to supply is a starting point from which you can embark in any direction which chances to suit you.

And let me urge you, even more strongly, not to reject it as being too complex. I do not regard that complexity as an objection — quite the contrary.

Not only have I stated that a man acquires an education in art not by *learning to see predestined beauties*, but by *complexifying himself* and taking a chance on what particular beauties would thereby come his way, but I have also admitted frankly that, after reading this book, he would be in a greater confusion about art than he had been before.

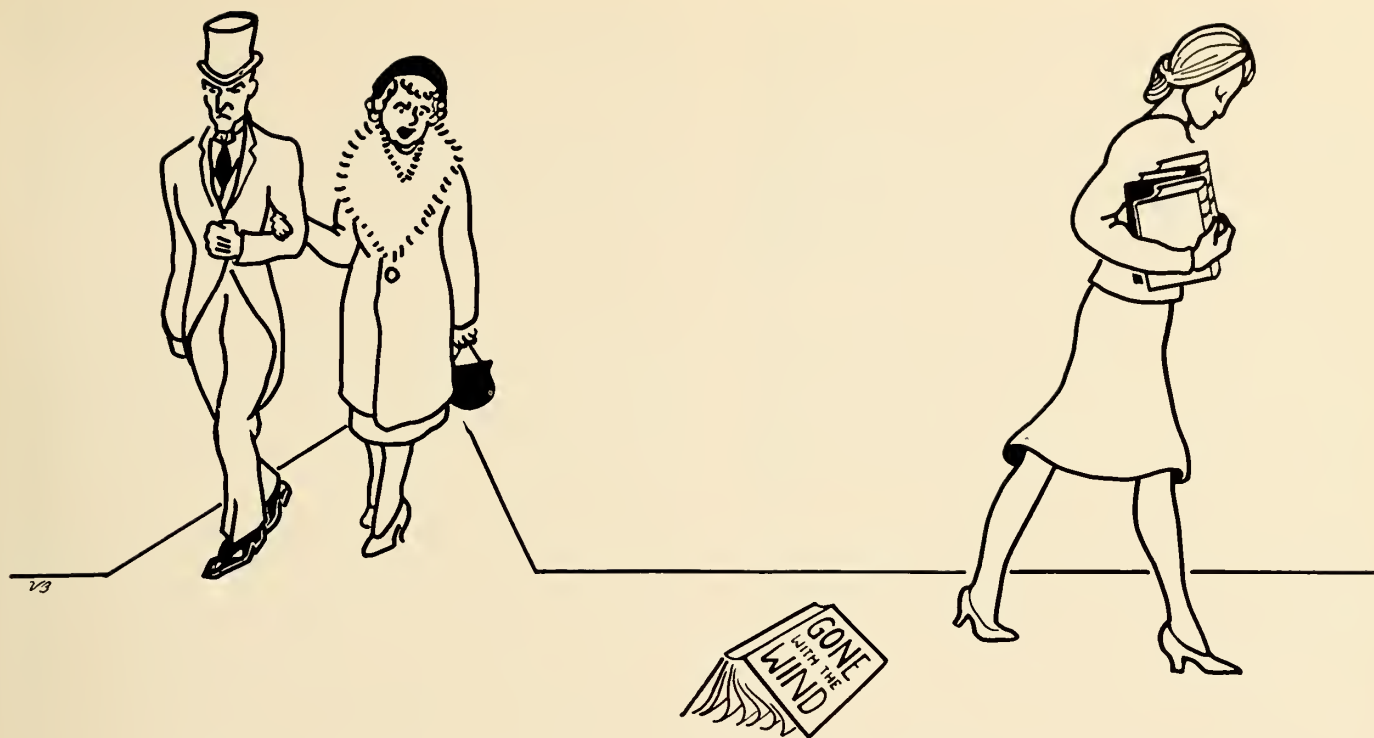
It would be a more beneficent confusion, however. It would be the kind of confusion which results from his seeing how much more is still to be learned about art and not a confusion which results from beginning to *see through* the obvious nonsensicality of what has previously been "taught" him — such as that art is the reducing of chaos to order, or that all great art is simple, or that unity is an essential to beauty (or pleasurable), or that such things as immortal art works are actual reality rather than somebody's pipe-dream.

And besides this there are also certain other very practical advantages to be derived from what I have said.

For example, it becomes clear that there is no one complexity-level in art which is exclusively the province of either the simple or the complex man.

For his own health and for the preservation of his life, man must have freedom of movement through every kind of art and through the entire scale of every emotion. To deprive him of pleasures that are laid on thick, as, for example, those he gets through sentimentality, the best seller, the "pretty picture", melodrama, jazz, the slap-stick farce and so on is simply to debilitate him — to deprive him of the vitality essential for the exploration (when the mood comes) of those more complex and disciplined modes of life to which critics wish to confine him. And I am making this statement in regard to *everybody* — not merely the less educated man. It may be that the greater an individual's degree of culture, the quicker he obtains a surfeit of the more intense and primitive sensations; but this does not free him from the need of them. Where five tosses of the custard pie into the prime

*Of course if you desire finally and positively to define "good" art (or beauty) *not* as that which gives you pleasure *now* but as that which *educates* you for pleasures of the *future*, such a definition is legitimate. But in that case you must live up to it. Which means that once an art work has given you that education — once you completely understand it — you have no further use for it, and are willing to set it aside — as you would the multiplication table. You would have no right under the concept of an art work as something to develop your intelligence to go back to it afterwards for the pleasure you might derive from it. To do so would be that last abjection and turpitude of non-art, contemptuously referred to by critics as "mere entertainment."



"Perhaps it's not an immortal masterpiece, but won't you even tell her she's dropped it?"

minister's face may be required to exhaust the naive man's enjoyment of the procedure, one may be enough for the sophisticate, but the basic demand is there in both fellows.

But this wideness of range — this overlapping of territories between the complex and the simple man — does not take away the critic's right to venture *guesses* — and good ones — as to the "greatness" (or pleurability) of various art works in relation to such men.

As a basis for such guesses, I think it is safe to say that the greater the distance (either up or down) between the art work's complexity and the perceiving man's own complexity the smaller the chance of its pleurability to him, especially if his perception of the art work has a considerable time-duration. The chances that Man A, at his low level of complexity, would derive any pleasure from *Till Eulenspiegel* (through all its length) or from Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (in all its five volumes) is so small as to be negligible, although it is conceivable that he might derive pleasure from short passages in either work.

And similarly the chances that a complex man would derive pleasure from a farce which consisted in a prolongation of the above-mentioned pie-tossing theme, would also be negligible, although, as I said, one such toss might amuse him.

Consequently a knowledge of the complexity ratio between a man and an art work gives you some authority for a guess as to the art work's "goodness" in relation to him, even if you don't know anything at all about his mode of life.

And if, on top of that, you are also acquainted with where he lives, the business he is in, his hob-

bies, prejudices and so on, the chance for a good guess is that much better.

Fatigue, however, is the foundation of it all and any attempt to deliver verdicts on any other foundation is completely without validity.

And if you remind me that complexities are not as easy to read as this may sound, you are right.

But a studying of them is a part of that bit by bit progress towards an understanding of art which I have recommended in preference to solving the whole problem at one stroke with some mystic wave of the wand.

Which leads me to the final point I would like to emphasize in this chapter — namely that if, as a critic, your objective is to lift man (either generally or individually) from "bad art" to "good art" the best way to do it is not by *denying* him the bad art but by *satiating* him of it.

Under that plan he moves ahead enthusiastically, effectively, sincerely. Otherwise it is just pretence and hypocrisy.

Merely transporting him physically to your level doesn't accomplish anything except alienate the poor fellow, and make him all the more anxious to get away from you and back to where he belongs.

So long as he is happy in that abode, why should he move!!

No, you must first *destroy* his happiness there; you must tire him of the art works at his level so that he feels a *necessity* to move higher.

Do not interpret this as indicating that you should take a merely negative attitude and wait

until the fatigue catches up with him by itself. Not at all; you can speed his satiation in a score of ways.

In the field of literature, for instance, you can characterize a certain novel (which he enjoyed) as "simply a variant of the Cinderella story." Or of another novel you can say that all its characters are merely stereotypes — the hundred per cent villain, the pure and noble heroine, the all-miser miser, and so on. Thereafter he may himself discern those stereotypes in other novels and tire of them all the faster.

No verdict of betterness is involved however. There is nothing essentially "wrong" in the Cinderella story, nor in the all-black villain or the all-white heroine. It's simply that, to the more complex person, they are too easily and quickly recognizable and (like any other naiveté) won't stand up so well against reiteration.

Any effort on your part to skip this process — that is to jump your man over "bad art" immediately to the good before he is ready, is as ineffective as

jumping him into higher mathematics without a preliminary study of addition, subtraction, short and long division. It's just the slow way of doing it.*

If he isn't bright enough to move higher all you accomplish by nagging him is to present him with an inferiority complex and make him dislike you for the donation.

*In confirmation of this principle I quote as follows from an article by Blake Clark in *Readers Digest* (May, 1961). "Improving your vocabulary cannot be done at random. O'Connor has found that each word has its own degree of difficulty in respect to others, and that we all learn words in a similar progression. Thus, a person with a seventh-grade vocabulary cannot ordinarily gain command of college-freshman words until he first masters those of the intervening grade levels. The more complicated college-freshman words, even if laboriously committed to memory, rarely become part of his working vocabulary and are soon forgotten."

How To Show Your Brain Who's The Boss

If the rather bleak realities with which I have been confronting you are becoming unbearable and the yearning to relax again in your little dream-world of make-believe is acquiring a force which you can no longer resist, let me suggest a method by which you can correct an unpleasant situation of this kind not only on the present occasion but at any time in the future. I think I can best illustrate it by an analogy.

Suppose, for example, that while occupied in your study of what causes the tides of the ocean, you are continually being annoyed by the attempt of certain "materialistic" men to make you think that "irrelevant and exterior forces" — such as the moon and the sun — have anything to do with the matter. You don't want "foreign bodies" interfering in the earth's affairs, we will say.

The solution is to turn your attention firmly elsewhere. Concentrate your efforts on purely earthy explanations, such as conformations of the ocean bottom; irregularities of the coast-line contour; wind-directions; degrees of the ocean's saltiness; water temperatures; presence of algae and other alien substances in the water; inflow from rivers; sectional variations in rain-fall, and so on. With this multitude of elements on hand, you should have little difficulty in working up a sufficiently plausible case for yourself so that — with an occasional clenching of the jaw and an appeal to your "firmness of character" — any fellow who calls your attention to the strange synchronizing of high tides with

the fullness of the moon and other related phenomena will get nowhere at all. "Just another crank", you'll say.

That's the general method — a compelling of the mind to look where you want it to look.

And you should have no difficulty in applying it to art. If some fanatic mentions fatigue, ignore him; if some busybody suggests that instead of giving your attention exclusively to the art works themselves you take note of what the world is doing to them, give him an equally cold shoulder. As you see, the authorities whom I have quoted in this book (including the Metropolitan Museum of Art) have no difficulty — or compunction — in following this practice, so why can't you!

All you have to watch out for is your brain. This unruly component of your ego is always looking for a chance to make mischief. Let me tell you of a case. A friend of mine was living comfortably on the fourteenth floor of a very fine apartment house — until his brain happened to notice that the floor below him was the twelfth floor. From that time on, his brain gave him no rest. "No matter what room number the renting agents (coddling your superstitions) paint on your front door", his brain kept telling him, "you're living on the thirteenth floor". Eventually the unfortunate chap had to move elsewhere.

Don't let your brain act that way with you. Let the animal see who's in complete charge.

Chapter XI

Complexify Yourself

When I asserted that your motto for learning to understand art should be, *Complexify Yourself* (as contrasted with the Metropolitan Museum's motto, *Hurrah for Beauty*) I also asserted that there was no one best way to do it.

However, in case you are wondering how to get going let me suggest a method that isn't bad — although occasionally painful.

It consists in reading plentifully what critics have to say about art and simultaneously having a very low opinion of them for saying it.

In other words, make use of their eyesight, which may be sharp, but disregard their mental reactions, which are usually wrong.

Throw them off the judge's bench, that is; remove their robes of office, let them tell you, *on the witness stand, what they actually saw* and then get rid of them fast — before they muddle you up with their grandiosities and clairvoyances.

It's not always easy to do because they are smooth talkers; but try it.

In order to give you a good start I present you here with a miscellaneous assortment of criti-

cal comments on which you can test your capacity to extract from them what is useful and at the same time build up a sufficiently vehement scorn for the rest.

In many of them the absurdity, prevarication or illogicality sticks out so sharply that no identification is required. In others I have provided a clue, either to bring out the point more rapidly, or to administer an appropriate gibe.

The next step — after having survived this ordeal — is to apply what you have learned from it to actual cases. Often it is easy.

To decide whether or not a sculpture could or could not be rolled down hill, whether or not a painting has "Cézanne's lucid and structural brush strokes," whether or not the figure in a portrait "stood ambiguously" or "toppled out of its frame," whether or not "ornament is developed within the nature of architecture and as an organic part of such expression," is not too difficult.

But don't weaken during the operation. Don't let a critic's description — no matter how deftly worded — persuade you that any one adjudication of "good" or "bad" necessarily follows from that description.* If your reaction happens to conform with his, okay, but it's just a coincidence, and doesn't mean a thing except that you and one other individual on earth momentarily shared the same pattern of nerve fatigue.

*This is not to deny that "art works" could be created which would be "bad" ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Any man could create such an art work if he wanted to, merely by a continuous piling on of one flavor of monotony — blowing a tin horn in your ear, or writing a long novel with a three-word vocabulary. I have taken it for granted throughout this book that you can make allowance for such cases. It all comes inside the basic concept of fatigue.

Averagely, Bromidically and Commonplacely Stupid!

If any critic existed who could always and unerringly enunciate what was the stupidest bit of art criticism in the world, up to that date, he would, of course, be a delightful fellow to have around. The extremes of almost any quality (good or bad) are interesting at least momentarily; and I should be glad indeed to present you actual examples, if I could.

Unfortunately the stupidities which I now quote you fall far short of that superlativity. They are ordinary and banal stupidities — which almost any critic could produce while seventy per cent of his brain was busy on something much more important. I burden you with them as a purely educational project and because each one presents its own little lesson about an error you'd better not make.

The point to hold always in mind, as you examine them, is that every one-best-wayism is inevitably a taboo, and that every taboo is inevitably an attempt to make art something smaller than it naturally is.

Here we go: —

Every good statue is marked by a certain air of repose; every fine picture exists in a state of stable

equilibrium brought about by the balance of its masses; and every great work of literature conveys to the reader a certain sense that a peace of some sort reigns within the domain which it describes. Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper*.

Without the disappearance of tranquility no good poem can be written, and the trouble with the kind of poem I have called the poetry of revery is that when we are reading it we feel the tranquility is still there. . . . It is because we never feel like this about Shakespeare that we consider Shakespeare so great a poet, and it is because we often feel like this about Tennyson, that Tennyson's reputation is dubious. Theodore Spencer, *The Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats*.

The fact that these two exactly contradict each other is interesting only as a curiosity. Either formula — whether its purpose is to taboo tranquility or tranquility — can have only one effect — to imprison art.

(Continued on lower part of next page)

Two defenses may be advanced for critical fatuities such as these I have brought to your attention — neither of them valid.

The first is that they are exceptional.

It's not so. I could easily fill a hundred volumes the size of this with equally atrocious samples. The carelessness and irresponsibility and lack of thought, which are so noticeable in these few, permeate criticism, even at the highest and most "scholarly" levels.

The second is that critics are not *supposed* to be taken seriously. Their function is merely to entertain you — to put on a sort of vaudeville act.

I do not sense the presence of any such frame of mind among them. Quite the contrary: certitude, arrogance, infallibility exude from their effusions like malaria from a quagmire.

The spirit with which the stage magician handcuffs his comely female assistant, locks her inside the trunk, immerses her (thus incarcerated) in the water-tank, only to have her reappear seconds later from a cabinet hung in mid-air, is totally absent from their writings.

They are "*telling*" you, absolutely. You are the traditional dupe, semi-moron and push-over on whose innocence they have been battenning for centuries.

More of the Same!

(Continued from previous page)

When writing a novel a writer should create living people, not characters. A *character* is a caricature. Ernest Hemingway.

But there is nothing wrong with a caricature unless you assume that a novel *must* give a "true" picture of life — thus introducing another taboo.

Adopting such a doctrine could easily have deprived us of Don Quixote, Mr. Pickwick, at least four characters, (Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Bennet) in *Pride and Prejudice*, and a countless number of others.

Invented physique stigmatizes the inferior novel . . . wholly invented scene is as unsatisfactory (thin) as wholly invented physique for a character. Elizabeth Bowen, *Notes on Writing a Novel*.

Just as bad as Hemingway's, and for the same reason.

A revealing demand (for unified effect) is that of Michelangelo: that a statue should be so simplified and compressed, so devoid of excessive protrusions, that it could be safely rolled down a hill without fear of breaking. The Winged Victory would not stand this test, nor the Apollo Belvedere; which is one reason at least for their inferiority to the greatest examples of the Archaic. Helen Huss Parkhurst, *Beauty*.

Imagine an art of sculpture in which you had only two choices: either to create a statue which could safely be rolled down hill or else create one which was inevitably inferior!

Today the bubble of Murillo's fame has burst. It is seen that the figures are posed, that the subjects are sentimentalized; the 'masterly' painting is recognized as surface craftsmanship, of an academic order. . . . They (the Spanish pictures) are ornamentally florid or, as pictures, over-detailed. Incidentally, they soon come to be loaded with excessive molasses-like color. The simple linear harmonies, the naive directness of statement and the transparency of color so notable in the works of the gentle Franciscans are missing. . . . Where Duccio edged draperies delicately with a line of gold, the Spaniards built up wide-gilded borders, Sheldon Cheney, *A World History of Art*.

At the memorial exhibition with half a dozen (Sargent) portraits that seemed fit company for the Halses, Rembrandts, Velasquezes and Van Dykes . . . were many of which to speak little is charity — figures that stood ambiguously, or toppled out of their frames, speciously painted stuff with nobody inside, beautifully painted heads with nothing below the neck . . . many pictures that seem oddly out of fashion — a look that a first-rate picture never gets. Generally speaking, the showy portraits were the bad portraits, the "Mrs. Swinton" being the type with its brittle and hollow



Appeal to the Great Spirit, Dallin*

This famous statue, now standing in front of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, would obviously be one of the first to go under Michelangelo's dictum. A roll down hill (if steep enough) would flinderate it.

*Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

workmanship, its entire absence of any reasonable grammar of painting. . . . One recalls pictures (by Sargent) as masterly as works as they are as human interpretations, others merely assertive and clever, still others showy and flimsy, again others objective and heartlessly faithful to the look of things, mural paintings over-ingeniously archeological, others highly decorative in a melodramatic way, others highly undecorative in a melodramatic way, a few highly decorative and as deeply felt, some mildly decorative and hardly felt at all. Frank Jewett Mather, Jr. *Estimates in Art*.

"Let's all love the same things I do", is what critics appear to be saying in the following series.

All ornament, if not developed within the nature of architecture and as organic part of such expression, vitiates the whole fabric no matter how clever or beautiful it may be as something in itself. Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Future of Architecture*.

Perhaps after the tensions of the opening concert are passed the Roth Quartet will achieve a little more abandon and freedom than was apparent in the playing of the two string quartets. It was all rather academic Beethoven, precise and clear, but overly cautious and restrained. The abrupt contrasts, so essential to the Beethoven idiom, were more often suggested than tellingly accomplished; a more urgent rhythmical impulse, sharper accentuation, and a more explicit color scheme would help. Arthur Goldberg, in *Los Angeles Times*, February 19, 1959.

Schumann's "Warum" discloses Paderewski's beautiful tone and poetic feeling. It also discloses the unhappy traits of melodramatic expressivity — the agonized cantilena, the torn-to-tatters meter, the hands played one before the other. Abram Chasins, *The Art of Paderewski*.

The perverse, bull-headed refusal to recognize the effect of fatigue strikes you with stunning force in these verdicts. The "badness" of "hands played one before the other" or of an "overly cautious and constrained rendition" or the "goodness" or "a more urgent rhythmical impulse", and so on, are presented to you not (as they should be) as the merely accidental result of men's getting too much lately of one thing and not enough of another (as admittedly are the badness or goodness of the "bouffant skirt" or of the short sleeve to the couturier) but are presented to you as the inevitable result of the breaking or not breaking of art's eternal principles. Until you've shaken yourself free from this tyranny (or quackery) you haven't taken even the first step towards an understanding of art.

Or take Pauline Lord and those pauses she knew how to use better than any other actress I have seen. A simple speech among the bevy of young ladies in "Tre-

lawney of the Wells" — "It is a dark and rainy afternoon, what shall we do to pass the time? Let's tell our ages" — became incredible comedy through the shy voice and most of all through the divine pauses before "Let's" and after "tell". Stark Young, in *Harper's Magazine*, March, 1960.

Tallulah Bankhead, Fanny Brice and Ethel Barrymore might have done it very differently and been all the better for it.

The next two can be fairly described, I think, as merely "talking jags" or exhibitionisms.

Similarly in the metric of Sturge Moore there is a kind of woolly desperation, in Herbert Read a brittle desperation, and a mechanical, relaxed desperation, striking idly on underwater objects, in Hardy. Desperation is the quality of action at some critical point unsuccessful because the writer's equipment is lacking. None of these poets in the bulk of their verse . . . took enough stock in the music of the muse. Hence there is not often enough the steady pressure of cohesion, speed and exigence. But all of them are better than the flannel-mouthed inflation in the metric of Robinson Jeffers with his rock garden violence. . . . None of these men are bad poets, all of them require reading. R. P. Blackmur, *Kenyon Review*, Winter, 1952.

Take Kandinsky's *Black Lines, No. 189*, painted in 1913. In color vapid, indefinite in every tone, with no sort of weight or finality in any single color-area or shape or form. A steamy, streaming flow and flux permeating all its ingredients; a lopsided, sideways-slipping scheme made up of a mass of unrelated, glittering touches — all different in tempo, in touch-pressure and in rhythmic character; a total absence of that underlying pulse, that as it were subterranean rhythmic unity which gave strength to the apparently shifting, disorganized atmospheric surfaces of the Impressionists or Turner — to name examples that might be thought (wrongly) to exemplify the less formal in painting. Every element in such a painting as this is awkward, at odds with the media, at odds with the flatness and squareness of the canvas itself. It epitomizes unwisdom in painting. The sad, twitching, sliding brush lines wander with a perverse movement over the canvas, beginning with a show of impetuosity and then tailing off weakly, into nothingness, a feeble twitching and an erratic slashing and stabbing, alternating undecidedly. And the corners of the canvas are empty, proving that the type of thought here expressed is essentially non-plastic, non-pictorial: the picture surface is not a cardinal reality to the creator of this work. Patrick Heron, in *Arts*, September, 1957.

Before you charge me with being overly quick to call critics stupid, let me admit that there is more than mere stupidity involved. Something is pushing these boys into their stupidity — a force which they haven't the courage to resist — as I shall explain in Appendix C. So if you prefer to describe them merely as being too cowardly to stop being stupid, that might be acceptable.

Chapter XII

Beauty Destruction as a Goal

If, as suggested in the last chapter, you acquire the ability to sum up the art critic's entire ego in the concept "a practiced eye operating on a muddled brain", it is possible — by reading him backwards, as it were — to acquire useful knowledge from what he says.

A similarly reverse approach will often, I am glad to say, enable you to draw benefits from the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*.

The method, in this case, is to take note of the "beauties" to which the museum so frequently and enthusiastically calls your attention and turn them upside down.

Instead of employing these beauties for the museum's purpose; namely, to insure your permanently adoring the paintings which (according to the museum) contain those beauties, you use them for an exactly opposite purpose — *to tire of the paintings as rapidly as possible*.

Now, before I explain how such a process of demolishing beauty is neither so difficult nor so objectionable as it may sound, let me introduce the key word which I shall use.

It is *obtrusiveness*.

An obtrusiveness in a painting is *anything you particularly notice in it, whether you notice it with pleasure or with pain; and correspondingly, a beauty is an obtrusiveness which you still like*.

It is usually a simplicity (either of understoodness or of confusion) with the strength of its obtrusiveness depending on its simplicity multiplied by its intensity. A complexity is less likely to be obtrusive because (by definition) it spreads its impact over a wider variety of nerve channels than a simplicity does.

However, any way you look at it an obtrusiveness is obtrusive — is something that hits you especially hard — and therefore has a high-tiring effect on the observer.

Thus when the Metropolitan Museum calls your attention to the particular "beauties" or "meritorious features" in certain paintings it is, in effect, identifying them (unconsciously) as obtrusiveness, with a speed of tiring corresponding to the degree of their obtrusiveness. It is *assisting* you (again unconsciously) not to like them any more.



Figure 42, La Source, Ingres

A horrible thought, no doubt!

Actually, however, it is horrible *only from the point of view of the museum*, whose slogan "Hurrah for Beauty" (donated by me, I concede) is based on the supposed permanence (and even inexhaustibility) of beauty.

From the point of view advocated by this book, on the contrary, it is not horrible at all, but an excellent idea. The greatest favor a teacher, a critic, or an art museum can do for you is to satiate you of art works — to destroy their beauty* thus pushing you on to more advanced art works, and

*I exclude from this *beneficial* process of destruction, the derisive comments of the ignoramus who abuses what he has not yet learned to understand. You will have no difficulty, I believe, in discriminating between the two kinds of destruction.

helping you (and all your fellow mortals) to move eagerly ahead — as you ought — instead of moping your life away trying to love the same things grandpa did.

And having reached this point I propose the following rather bold *statement of principle*:

The speed of tiring of any painting, *taken as a whole*, is the same as the speed of tiring of its most obtrusive element.

Very naturally, the validity of this principle stands out most conspicuously in a relatively simple painting, wherein there is a minimum of doubt as to which element in it possesses this outstanding obtrusiveness.

For example, consider Ingres' famous painting *La Source*, shown in Figure 42. If you are willing to concede (and in doing so you would have wide support, I believe) that the contour-line of the woman's body and vase is the picture's outstanding obtrusiveness (or beauty) then you would also concede, I believe, that when you are tired of that contour-line you are tired of the whole picture. Such other elements as it may possess — have not sufficient force to draw the eye away from the main obtrusiveness, which obtrusiveness, though previously beautiful, has now become unbeautiful. They are lost in the general impact.

This is an easy case, of course. So let's step up to a more complex one — another picture by Ingres, *Jupiter and Thetis*, shown in Figure 43.



Figure 43, *Jupiter & Thetis*, Ingres



Figure 44, *Death of Socrates*, David

I have classified it as an *obtrusiveness of gesture*, because, to my particular state of mind, Thetis' artificially and melodramatically* upstretched left arm and hand attract and hold the observer's eye much more insistently and strongly than do the picture's other possible obtrusivenesses — such as its obtrusiveness of story,** of cloud formation, of Jupiter's right arm and staff, and so on.

However, even though there is more competition of obtrusiveness in this case I still feel safe in saying that the picture's total resistance to reiteration depends on how often and how long you can look at Thetis' arm (and simultaneously at the picture itself) before your eyes are forced elsewhere out of fatigue.

Next, let's look at the David painting, shown in Figure 44. It's a decidedly more complex picture. There is manifestly a strong obtrusiveness of gesture in Socrates' left arm and hand. But it seems to have a less emphasis than Thetis' left arm and hand, because there are more competing elements — such as the picture's "story", the cup of hemlock, and the man holding it, the numerous mourners, the view through the doorway, and so on. These contending elements greatly reduce the salience of Socrates' gestures, with the result that, although I have classified the picture as an "obtrusiveness of gesture", I think that the most powerful factor toward the picture's speed of tiring would be the obtrusiveness of its story. Even this is not vehemently stressed, and the picture, taken as a whole, would, in my opinion, have a decidedly lower speed of tiring than *Jupiter and Thetis*.

Now, although these two analyses are enough to give you a starting point from which you can frequently make good guesses as to the relative tiring speeds of art works *in relation to yourself* (since you presumably have acquired a considerable knowledge of your own temperament) they are of

*Do not interpret this as a depreciation of either artificiality or melodrama. I mention these here simply because they *accentuate* the obtrusiveness.

**In case you remind me that Thetis' arm gesture is part of the picture's story, I must concede that you are right. But the gesture seems to have an obtrusiveness of its own, besides.

less value when you want to make good guesses *in relation to other people*.

As soon as you *step out into the world*, you come up against the question of what particular kind of *susceptibility to obtrusiveness* is the correct susceptibility.

Suppose, for example, you meet a certain Mr. X (reasonably intelligent, let's say) who, when confronted with Picasso's *Lady in Blue* (Figure 45) remarks "I can't stand that picture. All I can see in it is a woman pretending she feels like shooting herself."*

What can you do to cure him of this "grotesque obsession", if you can call it that?

Often, very little.

If he is a "simple" man — if his oddity is the result of his slow progression to complexity in the subject "painting" — then there is a chance that his "wrong reaction" may be corrected thus: —

Resisting the temptation to walk away from him with a cold smile, you remark pleasantly, "I see what you mean" (and actually you should) and then you try lifting him up to your height of complexity by calling his attention to various "beauties" which you think might be within his comprehension.

*Or, if you prefer, "a woman pretending that a very clever idea has just flashed into her brain."



Figure 45, *Lady in Blue*, Picasso

It may work. The procedure is a little like saying to a young child who is afraid to look over the precipice-edge at the view in the valley below: "don't be frightened — I'm holding you."

But he doesn't *have* to be a simple man. A "vagary" such as his is by no means incompatible with a high "artistic sensitivity." Any one of a dozen entirely normal accidents of Mr. X's life could have given him a twist of that sort; and all you can do is wait for another accident to twist him back again.

No man can (or should) build his whole character on art — not even the artist. No man can (or should) suppress the quick, automatic, and often life-saving reactions which have established themselves in his nerve-system as the result of his desire to get along in the world and keep his health.

In fact if (disregarding this advice) he tries to give himself a second personality — just for art and immune to all reactions except "arty" ones — that second personality will soon be forcing its way in at the wrong moment and will fail to stop him — as his more practical personality would have — from stepping on the rattle-snake, taking a high dive into an empty swimming pool or drinking down any colorless liquid (say prussic acid) which chances to look like water at a casual glance — with disastrous results to his life expectancy.

No; if you desire to communicate intelligently with your fellow men (including Mr. X), you must accept them in their *wholeness* — and not in such dilettantish sub-segments of themselves as they might conjure up especially for "arty" moments. You must learn to make allowances for their oddities even when, to you, they seem almost to be irrationalities.

All of which brings us back, I believe, to the basic truth (despite critics' vehement protests) that *art is for man* as he is, and not for man as critics would like him to be — and that, consequently, you must never lose sight of the fact that three, five, or ten hours before any man decides (for reasons of his own) to get some *fun out of ART*, he has very possibly been extremely busy with such ordinary affairs as paying bills, driving his car through heavy traffic, teaching school, trading on the stock exchange, or serving on a jury, and that what he wants art to do is give him relief from whatever emotions he has had too much of.

You have no right to expect him to fall into Mood 7G simply because a certain art work requires that mood for the fullest appreciation of it.

It is only the determinedly and self-consciously *artistic* man — the professional aesthete (or critic) with a dogma (immortalism) to support — who is upset when he is unable to adore as much as he ought that which he considers eternally adorable.

Here are two such fellows suffering dreadfully from the failure of their nerve system to react properly.

The first is Roger Fry, who in his book, "*French, Flemish and British Art*", reports the regrettable event thus:

"There are days of lowered vitality when one may wander disconsolate in a gallery like the Louvre, in

despair at one's incapacity to respond to the appeal of the great masters whom one had thought to be one's friends but who suddenly seem to speak in alien tongues."

The second is E. J. Watkin who in his book, *A Philosophy of Form*, thus describes a similar misadventure:

"Aesthetic intuition, however, is never subjective feeling, but always objective insight, as objective as mathematical or scientific intuition. The objectivity is clearly revealed when the vital pleasure which normally accompanies the intuition is absent, as when, for instance, after a sleepless night in the train I perceive the beauty of the Alps without enjoying it. Nor is the objection valid that in this case I perceive only the forms of the Alps, not their beauty. For that interpretation misrepresents my experience. I perceive the forms of the Alps specifically as being beautiful, so much so, indeed, that I feel chagrined at my inability to enjoy the beauty I perceive."

Two really amazing statements — illustrating to what extremes of self-deception critics are prepared to go in order not to acknowledge the existence of fatigue!

Mr. Watkins (after his sleepless night) was not seeing the Alps "specifically as being beautiful". He was simply seeing them as forms which — so his experience told him — he *usually* found beautiful; and that usual beauty, of course, was the result merely of the comparative rareness of his perceiving them, as corroborated by Addison who remarked after seeing the Alps, "how glad I am with the sight of a plain."

Art is not nearly the neatly-labeled and package-wrapped commodity which the critic likes to pretend in order to validate his incontrovertible verdicts.

His job, as I shall endeavor to demonstrate in the next chapter, is not to shape men into a supposedly perfect pattern capable of appreciating a perfect art, but to accept them as they are, in their infinite variety, and to make the best beauty-appraisals he can (subject to frequent change) in relation to the particular nerve-pattern which, by his conjecture, prevails among them at the moment.

Now, before I abandon the subject let me make certain that you do not interpret what I have said as a condemnation of obtrusiveness. That is not my wish.

Any artist who should attempt, in the producing of his art work, to eliminate (one by one) all obtrusivenesses — who should attempt, that is, to eliminate everything that attracted particular attention — would end by producing emotional nothingness.

No, as in so many cases, it is *manipulation* which counts. He must control and adjust his obtrusivenesses (or temporary beauties) depending on what group of men it happens to be his desire to confer pleasure upon.

This is especially important just now because so many artists have (lamentably) been misled by critics (and even by their own teachers, sometimes) into believing that certain art procedures are inevitably and always wrong — into believing that such a thing as "bad art" exists.



Figure 46. A Young Noblewoman, by an unknown Flemish artist, working in Spain.

Courtesy of Worcester Art Museum

To illustrate, I call your attention to the painting by an unknown artist shown in Figure 46.

The "rigidity" of this portrait, the flat and sharp-edged triangulation of the bodice, the precisionism and formality of the huge skirt, the geometric setness of all the picture's elements except the face and hands, are almost overpowering in their force.

I shall not endeavor to analyze the attraction which I hope you will derive from a first examination of this portrait, but an influence in that attraction may be the theoretical "wrongness" of such a technique and the resulting scarcity of other paintings which impart this flavor.

I believe I am correct in saying that it has a high speed of tiring. The pleasures derivable from looking at it are possibly short-lived but they are quickly renewed by abstention due to the lack of resemblances to it available elsewhere.

No matter how much "badness" there may supposedly be in any method of painting, its badness can be transmitted into "goodness" if enough painters are miseducated* into acknowledging that badness.

*As illustrated in Chapter III.

Practice In Estimating Speeds of Tiring

A critic's proficiency in making good guesses as to an art work's speed of tiring—or resistance to reiteration—is an important requisite for his being a success at his job.



The Concert Singer, Eakins

How successful an "artistic person" would be in forcing himself not to notice this singer's conspicuously open mouth and in forcing himself to notice, instead, more "aesthetic" elements in the painting, I cannot say. Most observers whom I put to the test failed dismally in the attempt, and the picture was given the highest rating for obtrusiveness of any shown in this chapter.



Starry Night, Van Gogh

So, in case you would like to develop your own proficiency in this direction, here are a few pictures you can try your hand on—doing as well as possible in spite of the absence of the originals in full color. It's a valuable skill to have.

However, just as valuable, either to the critic or to you, is a skill in making good guesses as to how much *strain of perception* is going to be brought to bear on that art work's



Tavern Scene, Brouwer

The fact that there are so many other things to notice in this picture prevents the eye from concentrating on the open mouths as much as it did in the Eakins. A decidedly lower obtrusiveness is the result.

particular resistance to reiteration, whatever it may be estimated as being.

Will the art work be subjected to such overwhelming pressures as are, for example, the *Statue of Liberty* or the *Eiffel Tower*, or will it be protected by its seclusion in a rarely-visited church in France or Italy?

Critics strongly resent your asking a question of this kind. Nevertheless—as I shall show you later—the ignoring of it leads only to frustration.

To most observers, the squirling lines of the sky were the decisive factor in estimating *Starry Night's* speed of tiring.

You may be interested, however, in considering another conceivable tiring factor—"being carried too swiftly to the edge of the picture and out of it"—which you had a narrow escape from.

Mr. Canaday (in the *Seminars in Art*) reports, as follows, how you were saved from the catastrophe.

"... the church steeple helps unify the composition, first by echoing the form of the cypresses and also by interrupting the insistent line of the hills against the sky. The rushing line of the horizon might otherwise carry us too swiftly to the edge of the picture and out of it."

Let's describe this briefly as what it is—the usual pre-tentious cant.



Crucifixion, Grünewald

The obtrusiveness of this picture was estimated to be about the same as that of *Death of Socrates* and *Jupiter and Thetis*. It was due not so much to a single gesture as to an accumulation of them.

In which connection you maybe interested in a recent "reappraisal" of Grünewald's greatness, as thus announced in *Time*, issue of May 26th, 1958.

Who was Germany's greatest painter? Half a century ago, the title would have been disputed among Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach and Hans Holbein the Younger. Now Nikolaus Pevsner, German-born head of the History of Art Department at London University's Birkbeck College, unhesitatingly comes out for the 16th century Gothic master whom critics have long called Matthias Grünewald.

Whether Professor Pevsner's adjudication is correct or not, I shall not say, but I call your attention to a point which is worth consideration: when a small group of painters — Dürer, Cranach and Holbein — have, for a considerable time, been regarded as the best in their nation's art, an especially wide circulation is very naturally given to their work thus bringing the force of fatigue more strongly to bear upon them. Grünewald not having been subjected to this pressure has profited accordingly. However, assuming that Professor Pevsner's verdict is accepted, Grünewald may shortly find himself similarly over-emphasized, with the result that some other critic — sharing Professor Pevsner's failure to perceive that fatigue is the motivating force here — may soon be restoring Dürer, Cranach and Holbein to their previous position at the top and Grünewald will drop back to where he was before. And so on; with critics being compelled to revise their "appraisals" with each fluctuation as though it were the inherent greatness of the artists which was causing the fluctuations and not the pressure of tiredness.



Woman with a Rake, Millet

Among my observers this picture had the lowest obtrusiveness of all. No single component of it seemed to possess any very compelling force.

However, you may be interested in two obtrusivenesses which Mr. Canaday has reported as follows:

"Yet that unpleasant character, the Count of Nieuwerkerke, could say of pictures like *The Sower*, *The Angelus*, and *Woman with a Rake*, 'This is the painting of men who don't change their linen, who want to intrude themselves upon gentlemen; this art offends me and disgusts me.' Today's critics would be more likely to find fault on the opposite score, that Millet has idealized his peasants to such an extent that their nobility is a bit oppressive, and that their earthiness has been lost in a general cleaning up."

The Count's obtrusiveness is obviously very much of his own particular social clique and era — and would be inapplicable to the present. The critics' obtrusiveness ("idealizing" the peasants) impresses me as a milder reaction to the same idea, but from the opposite direction, and would be equally inapplicable to the present.

One In a Million Who Dared Say It

Do not be alarmed, pious play-goer; people get tired of everything, and of nothing sooner than of what they most like. Bernard Shaw.

Chapter XIII

The Critic's Job

Critics have been deeply hurt in their souls, I believe, by the well-known saying *those who can, do; those who can't, teach*.

That's why they like to emphasize so strongly that criticism is *itself* an art — thus establishing themselves as artists in their own right, and controverting the accusation that they took up criticism out of disappointment.

In spite of my rather low opinion of critics I hesitate a bit at depriving them of this psychological life-belt — to which they have no doubt been clinging during those long hours of the night when their minds hark back over the inanities they have written during the day.

I am encouraged to reveal the bad news to them, however, because — as I shall explain in a moment — I plan to make it up to them in another way.

No; criticism is not an art. On the contrary it is a *service*, like medicine, which means that it is tied down by certain duties and obligations.

And for art, of course, that wouldn't do. Any obligation* would destroy it. Art demands complete freedom. In painting, for example, a horse can be green or purple, necks can be any lengths; bodies can have whatever number of legs, arms or eyes the artist desires; dragons are always welcome; nothing is too heavy to float through the air; and, despite critics' protests, no one degree or kind of rhythm, balance or unity is necessarily any better than another.

And corresponding liberties are permissible in Literature, Music, Drama and Ballet.

Criticism is not that way. Fantasy, extravaganza, exhibitionism are out of place in it. Its practitioners must be guided by the principles of the physician who declines to tell you that you have only six months to live despite the big laugh you both might have when he revealed a week later that he had been only joking. Critics must similarly control their propensities to be merry-andrews, romancers, harlequins, acrobats and prestidigitators — at least while on the job.

Ordinarily this switch of character wouldn't be too easy for them to make. Quite a wrench would be required. But, as I said, I have special inducements to offer them which may help. Not only will their previous misdemeanors be forgiven, but a new, exciting and worthwhile field of activity — not previously available — will be opened for them.

In the past, as you know, critics have occupied the *gallery*, so to speak. They have applauded or

jeered, but they haven't had anything to do with putting on the show. And there was a very good reason why they had not been given that chance — namely that the average man knew only too well what a low opinion critics had of him and knew only too well the kind of show they would produce for him if they were in charge.

Critics themselves made no secret of it. The general idea was succinctly expressed by critic Henry Hewes, in the *Saturday Review* (July 25, 1953):

"Other high principles which Mr. (Kermit) Bloomgarden will throw at his students include his conviction that a producer should produce only what seems good to him and not necessarily what he thinks audiences will like."

To these boys (still looking on themselves as "artists") men are merely the material on which Art happened to operate, as grass is to the lawnmower.

Art itself is what counts, nothing else. In fact, as soon as you deliver verdicts on the authority of standards, and deny fatigue, no other course is available.

An art work can still be "great" even if excessive perception of it (as from an unceasing rendition in men's ears of Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue*) resulted in the extermination of mankind.

So it's easy enough to understand why chaps who take so callous an attitude towards their fellows were not invited to put on shows for those same fellows.

From all of which it should now be clear to you what my scheme is.

If critics will promise to renounce this selfish, anti-social and even inhuman mode of thought, if they will agree hereafter to look on art as being for people rather than on people as being for art I would be willing to take a chance and allow them not only to express their opinions on art but also to have a voice as to what that art should be — have a voice, that is, in putting on the show.

This doesn't mean that they would actually *create* art, which job belongs elsewhere, of course.

No; their job would be to acquire a more thorough knowledge than anybody else of the world's available art works; to become better judges than anybody else of what art works would best please what kinds of people under what circumstances; to bring people into contact with those special art works they would enjoy, and to keep them away from those art works they wouldn't enjoy.

You might visualize them as aesthetic physicians, running a "giant drug store" of art recipes; organizing a research laboratory to discover new art recipes; and operating an efficient delivery service.

Which — as I think you must admit — offers very interesting possibilities. Critics could make a notable contribution to mankind in thus developing their capacities and ambitions.

Let me give you a few examples.

Imagine first, a certain *Group A*, composed of men of more than average intelligence living in New York (or Washington, or Boston, or Seattle), and imagine, second, that the impact of visual art upon them for the last few years could be summed up by the "Composite Picture" shown opposite.

*Except to alleviate tiredness.



Composite Picture #1

And suppose that the group, having grown dissatisfied with their aesthetic diet, consulted a critic (new style) as to what was wrong with it.

"Nothing's wrong with it," he responds. "The art works are okay, it's only that you've stuck to them too long and that they haven't the scope and variety to hold out against so much pressure. A wide range of art flavors exists which you're not getting at all. Let me show you."

Whereupon (after having made himself as well acquainted as possible with the members of the group) he organizes for them a pictorial menu which could be expressed, perhaps, in the composite picture on the next page.

"This will give you a start," he says. "I haven't jumped you ahead too much because it isn't advisable. Some of the pictures may bore you fast — and I hope they will. Let me know which ones do it, and what you think was the reason, and I'll provide substitutes."

And so on.

From year to year, he goes through his stock, manipulating and adjusting the "menu" according to the tastes of his group as their tastes develop.

There might be a trend towards greater complexity — subject, of course, to occasional recessions to simplicity not only for relief, but also as an expression of the necessity for such recessions. But there would be no pre-arranged schedule, based on supposed degrees of beauty.

Educational material would accompany the art works, but without the inclusion of permanent appraisals and above all without mysticism. If the critic pointed out certain obtrusivenesses (of style or subject) he would do so only as they were influences on speed of tiring. If he mentioned the fact that a certain art work had been admired (or condemned) by Titian or Manet or Matisse it would be only as an occurrence in history, and not as a suggestion that any member in the group should adopt that opinion.

And let me assure you that at the end, say, of five years, the members of the group would have acquired three times more of an education in art and a twice greater capacity to talk intelligently on the subject than would a similar group under the type of "education" now being provided by critics of the present school or by the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*.

All right; that example relates to a group of *intelligent* men.

Suppose, next, that another group, Group B, has the same ambition as the first, and similarly applies to the critic for his help. Regrettably this group is composed of earnest, well-meaning dumbbells. The critic has no compunction whatever about helping them, nevertheless. In a sense he might find the task all the more challenging, because the further men are removed from his own level of education the more difficult it is for him to estimate in advance what they will like. However, since an ability to make such estimates is one of the pre-requisites to being an efficient critic he goes ahead and does the best he knows how, always remembering the fact that however regrettable may be the existence on earth of "stupid men", there isn't much you can do about it. If you decide to kill them off — as you could (even if slowly) by depriving them of art

works to match their unintelligence — beginning with the stupidest men — the battlings as to where to stop and as to the proper IQ to employ in testing stupidity would become so fierce that the men who survived would, I think, be those with the best muscles rather than the best brains.

With this profound truth in mind, the critic, as I said, follows the same general procedure as before — namely to give his customers what they enjoyed, satiate them of it as rapidly as possible and thus lay the grounds for moving up to something more complex, according to their (lesser) ability.

And at the end, of course, he finds himself with a group of members who have made progress — up to their mental capacities of doing so — but are not nearly the equals of the men in the first group and have not gained nearly their range of understanding.

There are certain consolations available to him, however.

First, that he did his best under the conditions and that no other method could have done better.

Second, that he didn't infect them with inferiority complexes by pretentious rant and that as a result of his not doing so he has reduced by that much the number of snobs and hypocrites in circulation who are pretending to like what they don't.

Let's revert now to Group A (the intelligent men) and consider a possible subsidiary outcome of their association with the critic. Assuming (as seems likely) that there had been a considerable similarity of taste among them when they first consulted him, would that similarity continue (and perhaps even increase) under his guidance? I think it would be just the opposite. The further man advances from simplicity, the more numerous are the directions into which he can branch out, the more numerous are the art works he can take an interest in (even without full understanding) the greater the subtleties of difference in them that are available for observation and discussion — and the greater the nonconformities in his estimate of them.*

Which is just as it should be, and the more non-conformity the better. In saying that, I am not advocating anarchy. Complete nonconformity is impossible as long as men have certain basic similarities in their eyes, ears and other organs and in the brain's responses to the stimuli coming from those organs. But granting the conjunctive force of those similarities, and granting the uniform dominance of Fatigue, then the more the diversity of opinion the greater is the opportunity to expand, the larger is the stock of art works from which man can select those that suit him, and the more interesting are his contacts with his fellow men.

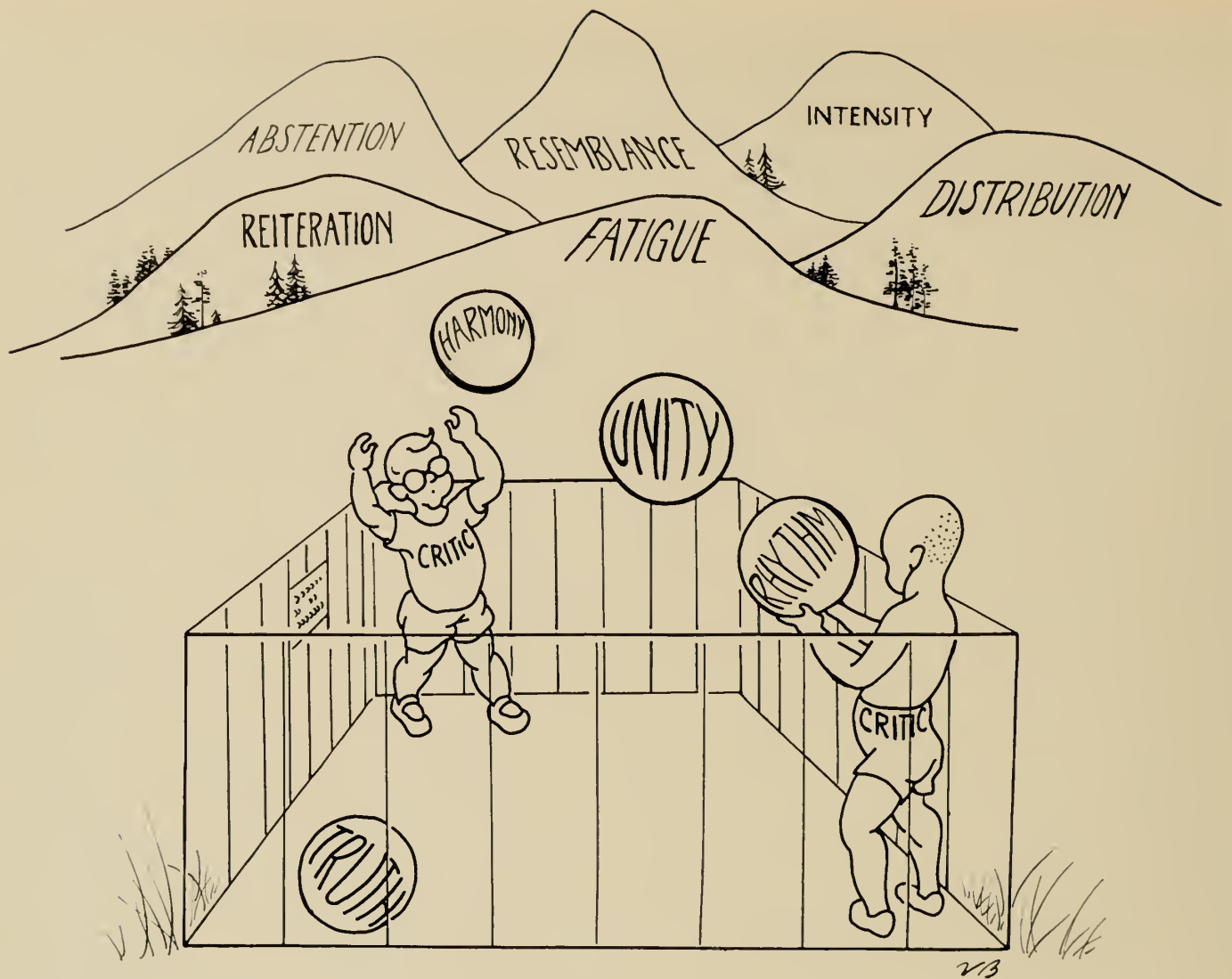
Contrast this with what would happen if old-style critics had their way.

Imagine that at the moment they took control, Composite Picture 1 could be considered as summing up the impact on mankind of visual art. What would they do to give men better "composites" from year to year and thus "elevate" them? They would approach the task somewhat as follows.

*And this would be true also for Group B (of stupid men) but less markedly.



Composite Picture #2



"Babes in Toyland"

Little children playing games in their pen and afraid to step out into the world.

First, they would abandon the idea of treating men in groups. What they regarded as best for one group of men would be best for all.

Second, they would run through the art works included in Composite Picture 1, looking for ones which, either by the "test of time" or their own unerring judgment, they recognized as "immortal masterpieces." Let's assume there were ten of them. They would retain these "products of man's genius as inspired by God" for next year's composite. All the rest they would discard, replacing them with what they considered better ones. Twelve months later, when the time came to prepare another composite, they possibly would discover that certain of their selections (another ten perhaps) had "met the test." So they would hold these over and replace all the rest as before.

And so on, until, after enough centuries had elapsed, they would end up with a composite picture, all of whose items were absolute perfection.

This, of course, completely solves the problem and nothing more remains to be done.

From that day on, man basks happily in the "paradise" the critics have constructed for him.

Now I hope — having reached this late page — that no reader is still on hand to whom the non-sensicality of any such solution is not immediately evident.

It neither *could* nor *should* ever happen. Thus to fashion all humanity into one shape would be impossible; and to live in such a world of sameness could end only in mass-suicide.

And yet I assure you that this is not an exaggerated depiction of what would happen. Not at all. It follows exactly from the principles which critics (and the Metropolitan Museum, with its *Seminars in Art*) are so fervently supporting. It follows exactly from "immortalism", "standards", and so on.

As soon as you permit your own education in art to be an education in *seeing beauty*, you are headed for exactly this kind of stultification.

No; critics must be working *away* from molding art (and man) into a die. They must differentiate and diversify it (and him) in every way possible.

But that is not all. Besides giving critics this simultaneous duty of being "warehouse-men", character judges, and educators I have still another — and perhaps even more important — duty for them, that of the watch-dog, the scout, the energizer, even the alarmist.

If the creation of art lags or falls into a rut — if critics find that, even after ransacking their stock of art works on hand and shuffling them into as wide a variety of combinations as possible their efforts fail to arouse the interest of their fellowmen — if the menu they deliver tends always to produce the same effect — namely, boredom — then they — with their panoramic view of the situation, with their greater knowledge of human psychology — have the best opportunity to correct the situation. If (not being artists) they *themselves* cannot create the requisite new flavors of art, they can at least demand that others create them. They can reprove, excoriate, ridicule artists for their timidity, irresolution, lack of invention. Copy-cats, sail-trimmers, band-wagon riders must be scolded out of their soft spots and told to get busy. And simultaneously they must give every encouragement to such artists as are earnestly striving to find new fields of endeavor, instead of censuring them (as now they so often do) for "merely trying to be different."*

And down with the artist, also, who "creates only for himself." *Later* he can revert to his long-range

*This tendency of theirs to despise what they scornfully call "mere novelty" is one of their more reprehensible habits. It's as senseless as despising an oxygen tent for "merely saving a man's life." Novelty is man's sustenance, his salvation. True, some novelties (wearing pink tights to church) lose their novelty too fast to be practical. But that's nothing against novelty. It merely means that novelty, like art itself, must be manipulated according to its speed of tiring.

ambitions*, but for the moment he must join in with his fellows, face the emergency and get art going again.

To critics of the old school any such campaign would be inconceivable. To take thought of humanity (including the "common man") rather than ART would obfuscate them.

Committed as they are to the doctrine of "immortal art", regarding themselves as the protectors of "eternal masterpieces", unable to admit that it is possible to have too much of such masterpieces; in this state of mental paralysis, all they can do is stand gulping and cringing on the side-lines, coddling their "principles" and putting obstacles in the way of artists who, aroused at last by the crisis, are trying to come to mankind's rescue.

Yes, the genuine critic, in such a predicament, must storm, remonstrate and protest with all his strength; but this does not mean that he accuses the current art of being "bad art." That's not the idea at all. He just doesn't want art to stand still. His appeal is not for something more beautiful, but for something (almost anything) dissimilar. If the dissimilarity has a future, if it can be broadly developed, so much the better, but any dissimilarity is better than none at all. At least it will give man a breathing-spell during which he can search for a dissimilarity that is more procreative.

Well, that's an abbreviated exposition of the new job that I offer critics. To speak of it as both worthwhile and interesting does not seem to me an exaggeration.

*I thus refer to it, because no artist really "creates only for himself." He is always thinking, "I'm not a freak. Some day, somewhere, men will be born who will enjoy what I am creating."

Chapter XIV

The Great Hoax

Mysticism can be dandy, plenty of times.

In a short story by Poe, Henry James or Kafka; in a painting by Klee, Dali, Bosch or Redon, it's swell.

But that is when it is used in *art*, and to *create*.

When, on the contrary, it is used in education* (or criticism) not to create but to *teach you something*, to *provide exact information*, then it's highly objectionable — and for a number of reasons.

First, mysticism is too easy. Almost any gabby person can throw himself into a trance and turn out cute mysticisms (similar to those shown on the opposite page) by the carload. Given ten thousand people, you have — or *could* have — ten million mysticisms; all different and all unrelated,

Second, there is no *future* to mysticism; you can't move ahead from one mysticism to a better mysticism, because each one is in a world of its own, entirely cut off from any others, and completely independent of rationality.

And third, mysticism takes all the fun and scope out of discussion. Of what value is any man's opinion of an art work when it can instantaneously and arbitrarily be invalidated by dragging in some cryptic whimsy? What satisfaction can he derive from saying that he likes a certain painting, or thinks it beautiful, when it can't really be much good because it isn't a "final orchestration of life's disharmonies" or because it "doesn't carry you into God's presence"?

Conversation simply comes to an end.

In fact, under such circumstances art criticism really ceases to exist, does it not!

Or if you remind me that I am exaggerating because men *do* continue to discuss art works — and at great length — even after mysticism has been introduced, I can only answer that they are not really discussing, but are merely conducting separate monologues, totally irrelevant to each other; and thus wasting their time.

And even the monologues themselves are worthless because they are based on something that doesn't exist — a fatigue-less world.

So, if you want mysticism *in Art*, very good. But down with it in Criticism and Education. It doesn't belong there any more than it does in Medicine or Geology or Astronomy.

And I beg of you not to come up with the old bromide here about art criticism *not being a science*. It's as much a science as anything is, as explained in appendix C.

Science is not off in a realm by itself any more than art is. Both are merely different phases of life, and each as much subject to study and research as any other phase.

It's merely that critics are up against difficulties of a different kind than are "scientists." Instead of facing difficulties involving objects, forces, properties and so on they are facing difficulties involving the temperaments, mental powers and emotions of men.

As to which set of difficulties is the greater — as to whether it is more difficult to know how a man will react under certain stimulations than it is to know what forms of life are conceivable on Star Betelgeuse (millions of light years distant from earth) is a matter wherein your guess is as good as anybody's.

But to declare that one particular degree or kind of difficulty is due to the existence of a mysticism inside it — and to declare, consequently, that whatever difficulties man may have overcome in the past (such as splitting the atom) must have been difficulties which had no mysticism inside them sounds very much like an excuse invented by a quick-thinker who was planning to use it for putting something over.

No; the alleged presence of mysticism in Art — and nowhere else — arises not out of something queer in art but out of something queer in men — and especially in critics.

And in case you are wondering why so many (seemingly) sincere fellows are addicts to mysticism let me remind you of two important facts: first, that it's fun (at least for men of a certain type) to play the oracle, the all-seeing one, even the charlatan, and second, that nowadays — at mankind's present level of civilization — there remains no field of endeavor except criticism wherein that fun is still obtainable without stepping openly into mumbo-jumbo.

Alchemy, horoscopy, spiritualism and other necromancies, though all reputable activities in their day, have now acquired almost as sharp a flavor of absurdity as reading tea leaves.

With the result that the psychic lad who likes to have deep, weird, metaphysical and even voodoo thoughts has nowhere to go except into art criticism — where he can tell his fellow inhabitants on earth how to see the "inner ecstasy" or the "symbolic self-sacrifice" in this, that or the other poem, play, painting or musical composition and thus demonstrate his uncanny sensitivity and vision.

This exhibitionistic passion to reveal his own reactions to art as though they were the god-given ones is not the only propensity, however, which turns a man into a critic. Another of equal force is his impatience, irresolution, hot-headedness. As I said earlier, the critic can't stand having anything unsolved around. Present him a tough problem and either he's going to give you the correct answer at once or else he tells you that there just *isn't* any correct answer — it's *extra-sensory*.

For the man who gets a kick out of that yogi

*As for example in the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art*.

Mystic Moonings

Gags like these come as near being useless as is conceivable. They teach you nothing and as purveyors of momentary excitations there are too many of them around for any one to be worth keeping on hand in preference to the rest.

Good painting is nothing else but a copy of the perfection of God and a reminder of His painting. Michelangelo.

In the eyes of God all that exists is beautiful. Jacques Maritain.

Art is an unearthly serenity like destiny that is unchanging and time that is eternal, while it flashes by. Olin Downes.

Art is man added to nature. Jean Cocteau.

What I have been striving for throughout my career is to be able to write a single dot, a common ordinary dot that anybody can make, into which I can pour out and consolidate my entire human worth, so that simple dot is simple no longer. Now, after all these years, I can say with confidence that my entire life is right in that dot. Taium Yanagida, noted Japanese calligraphic artist, as quoted in Newsweek, September 26, 1960.

The mystical vision is the Supreme form of the aesthetic experience, the contemplation of the highest possible values, those answering to the problem of the Universe itself. Not only is the mystical experience aesthetic, but every aesthetic experience is mystical to some degree. It is always an escape from the pressure of earthly existence to a communion with the ideal. Beauty never exists as other things do, never quite comes down to the common level, though it may subsist in certain situations as their essence, their meaning. Van Meter Ames, *Aesthetics of the Novel*.

A picture is the soul of an artist at the moment of painting. Max Jacob, in *L'Art Poétique*.

Art is a lie which makes us realize the truth. Picasso.

Art is the way the mind breathes. John Ciardi.

Art is the echo of a great soul. Longinus.

Art is essentially an expression of love, in all its many forms, from the erotic to the social. Lewis Mumford.

Art is technique, plus something. Hendrik Van Loon.

Nature and Art being two separate things cannot be the same thing. Picasso.

Art is the intuitive realization of the vacuity of existence. Georges Mathieu.

Art is in the symbolic representation of reality. Sir Herbert Read.

I rated Wolfe first, myself second. I put Hemingway last. I said we were all failures. All of us had failed to match

the dream of perfection and I rated the authors on the basis of their splendid failure to do the impossible. I believed Wolfe tried to do the greatest of the impossible, that he tried to reduce all human experience to literature. And I thought after Wolfe I had tried the most. William Faulkner, as quoted by Harvey Breit, in N. Y. Times Book Review, January 30, 1952.

A painting is an answer to a question. John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

Beauty is the battlefield where God and the Devil contend with one another for the heart of man. Dostoevski.

Art is the reproduction of what the senses perceive in nature through the soul of man. Edgar Allan Poe.

The art of the painter at its best is a revelation of truth as well as the artist could state it. Marshall B. Davidson, in the introduction to *Seminars in Art*.

The beauty of an object lies in its permanent possibility of creating the perfect moment. E. D. Puffer, *The Psychology of Beauty*.

Home-Made Ones

Art is the freeing of the soul from the body.

Art happens; it is never invented.

The seed of art is in one unselfish moment.

Art is in the selecting of the most beautiful snowflake that falls from the sky.

The first art work was the first infant's first smile.

To God everything is beautiful except that one infinitely small fragment of ugliness which is necessary to give Beauty a meaning.

Art does not understand. It feels.

Whatever life is, art is the fruition of it.

Man does not create art, art creates man.

Art is an illusion; that is why it is so real.

If man wills it, art is always there.

When a man creates art, he has ceased to be a man.

Distill reality and the residue is art.

Etcetera!

The man who — three hundred years ago — believed in witches was no more naive — **in relation to his era** — than is the man of today who believes that **Macbeth** will still be read ten centuries from now.

pose, this is well enough, no doubt. But for the ordinary chap so abject a surrender lacks appeal.

For him the fact that he is surrounded by seemingly incomprehensible enigmas — and that his progress (if any) in solving them is disappointingly slow — acts more as a spur to continue the effort than to give up.

The physician does not throw up his hands and stop trying because he does not know what causes the "common cold," or because he cannot predict the sex of the unborn child.

Instead, he investigates, studies, researches in the hope that he may eventually solve this particular problem; and others as they confront him.

If the weather man makes an error — if a blizzard pushes in when his prediction had been "fair and warmer" — he neither resigns his job in shame nor blames it on its being Friday the thirteenth or on interference from evil spirits. He simply explains that "something went wrong" and promises to do better as soon as more efficiently equipped satellites are in orbit to provide him the requisite data.

Because man cannot see exactly why the raindrops stream down his windowpane along certain paths rather than others, or because he cannot tell why his shoe-lace broke today and not last week does not warrant his concluding that banshees are playing tricks on him. It's just that his powers of observation are insufficient to perceive the complex interrelations that are at work; and he makes no effort to pretend otherwise.

This is the policy of the sincere man who feels that he is doing the best that is possible under present conditions, and declines to be forced into quackery by the anguished appeals of the ignorant.

The critic, as I said, won't have it that slow, persistent way. And since there is no escape from it except by faking — he fakes.

I think it can fairly be said, therefore, that man has a choice of two attitudes of mind (and two only) with which to face the fact that art is hard to understand.

He can say that it is hard to understand because of a supernatural and eternally incomprehensible quality (completely impervious to fatigue) that magically confers beauty (and immortality) on some art works and denies it to others.

Or he can say that it is hard to understand because it is based on a certain natural factor — Fatigue — which is *itself* hard to understand.

Especially prone to the mystic attitude is the resigned-type man, the extremely philosophical, "such is life" fellow, the rut-inhabitor, the defeatist — including (most decidedly) the chap who — as previously quoted in Chapter V — propounded the question:

"Man's abode is the earth. Are we not invading God's Kingdom as we prepare for human travel through the universe?"

Tending the other way is the enterprising, business-like, forward-looking, inquisitive and intelligent man* who sooner or later, I believe, will reach

the conclusion that to deny the dominance of Fatigue in art is as ridiculous as to deny the dominance of the moon over the ocean's tides; and that, consequently, the only way to learn more about art is to learn more about how, why and when man becomes tired of art and how best to use that knowledge in the future creation of art for man's own health and well-being.

He is now being hindered in acquiring that knowledge not only by the regrettable fact that Art — because of its own deeply psychologized nature — is more vulnerable to charlatanry and humbug than any other branches of human knowledge, but also by the fact (even more lamentable) that a well-organized group of smooth-talkers are taking advantage of that situation for their own benefit and are more than willing to let it stay that way.

Regretfully I am compelled to admit that certain discomforts may accrue upon any man who should adopt the rather bleak, anti-mystic and beauty-destructive concept of art advocated in these pages.

So widely is it taken for granted that certain art works are inevitably adorable — so universally accepted is the Metropolitan Museum's slogan, *Hurrah for Beauty* — that too open a display of his very contrary conviction can easily win him the same hostile and even frightened stares as were accorded, I imagine, approximately in the year 1682, to the first man on earth who stopped believing in the Evil Eye; and who — firm in his reform movement — dared give a friendly smile and a hearty hand-shake to a fellow-mortal from whom one look, reputedly, could fell an ox.

With the natural result that the unfortunate iconoclast — if he desires to maintain amiable relations with his acquaintances — has to keep a tight and *extremely wearing* grip on everything he says or does. It's a nuisance.

Ruthlessly to suppress the condescending smile which trembles on his lips as he listens to his friends' naive effusions about "immortal" art works is no easy task, considering how often it is demanded of him.

To be sympathetic — instead of disdainful — when they rhapsodize about character revelation, unity or "intuition" is equally difficult.

And to think up a more conciliatory answer than, "I haven't the least idea", every time he is asked whether the reading of a poem, a violin recital or a "flower-arrangement" is or is not "artistic" gradually becomes oppressively tiresome.

And there is always the danger, too, that one day — perhaps when asked if art is not a "transcending of the soul into ecstasy" — his power to hold himself in check will fail and (after groping for something solid to lean against) he will remark bitingly:

"Not to a man of my super-intelligence, Sir. In fact, last week I finally succeeded in so thoroughly understanding the world's art works that now I hate them all. Tomorrow I shall take a rocket to the moon in search of something new."

With such a calamity continually threatening him and with the worry — if this calamity should actually eventuate — as to how he would prevent his relatives from sending him to some quiet place for

*This is my choice of adjectives with which you are at liberty to disagree.

a long vacation, our hero might easily sink into a melancholia and thus end up in exactly the same quiet place he was so desirous of not going to.

As I said, the prospect is far from inviting.

Yet certain compensations do exist for any brave chap willing to take the chance.

Perhaps the most rewarding of them is his consciousness of no longer being the critic's easy mark.

Fatuities, priggeries, pretensions, such as those I have quoted all through this book either amuse him as might a five-year-old child's prattle about Santa Claus or else annoy him only for a brief moment as might a cold draft before he closes down the window.

And not only does this immunity provide him with a decidedly keen pleasure but the pleasure is both more lasting and more recurrent than are most.

I have no way of knowing how long it will be before our schools and colleges have taught a sufficiently large proportion of the population to see through sillinesses of this kind so that critics will be forced to stop excreting them.

But there is, I think, at least a chance — remembering the slowness of man's advancement — that for all the rest of his or any man's life (regardless of his present youth) he will have the satisfaction of belonging in that small minority of persons whose thinking apparatus is capable of efficiently operating even in the noxious gasses which ooze so profusely from contemporary criticism.

Not only that, but his having always available *at least this one* sense of his mental acumen (small or large) is extremely handy at those moments when his lack of it in other of life's activities has been uncomfortably brought home to him by an especially stupid mistake.

Postscript, for the Artist

If you have been wondering why there is no chapter in this book directed specifically to the Artist, the reason is that the *entire book* is directed to him.

It is directed to him because its chief purpose is to protect what is his most vital prerogative or right — Freedom of action.

Now please don't remind me that you — and everybody else — already know all about the artist's freedom of action. It's been emphasized, defended and fought for a million times. No, not in my way. There have always been strings tied to it.

The only freedom artists have gained — and they have had to battle even for that one — is the freedom to think up new ways *not* to be free. They have been free, that is, to conduct new (and supposedly more correct) "principles" (or dogmas) to replace the principles which had previously been regarded as correct, thus merely shutting themselves inside a different prison than before.

In fact nowhere more firmly than among artists themselves will you be told why such and such a principle is "good" and another "bad".

I have no intention of trying to demolish those principles, one by one, because there are too many of them. I shall merely say that the same thing is wrong with all of them — namely that they are not really principles at all but simply recipes for creating certain art-flavors.

For instance, one of these principles — and a highly respected one — is that if an artist is to produce a truly great art work he must be guided by something outside and independent of rational thought — namely by *intuition*.

Mr. Maurice Raynel expresses the general idea* thus:

"The world of art is a separate realm into which only artistic intuition can penetrate."

And Mr. Christopher Gray** reports that as a result of concurring in this dogma

"the artist learned through the power of his artistic insight to be able to grasp a part of the ultimate truth of the universe that was beyond the grasp of common men; a truth to which he gave material and outward expression through the creation of works of art. Indeed, it was his unique creative capacity and his deeper insight into the higher truth which set the artist above the common man."

Which, as you will admit, is pretty "far out."

Now, as I said, I have no intention of attacking it as a *theory*. I merely call your attention to what would happen if it were accepted — if all artists acted according to that theory.

You would end up not with a richer, more profound art, as you might imagine.

Not at all. You would end up with something very much the opposite — namely with a narrow, small, one-flavor *branch* of art (analogous to "dadaism" or "surrealism") — describable only as *Intuition Art*.

All artists who would be given the right to call themselves "artists" by the supporting of this principle, would be one-type men; refugees, so to speak, living in a separate (and tiny) world; obsessed by their aloofness from (and superiority to) the "common man"; delving deep into their "subconscious selves"; painting this, that or the other line or shape only because something mysterious inside them told them to do it. There would be no hard-headed, tough-minded men among them, no Rembrandts, Hogarths, Chardins, Toulouse-Lautrecs, Daumiers, Brouwers, Hoppers, Sheelers, Homers, no members of an "ash-can school"; only

*as supported, of course, by Immanuel Kant and Benedetto Croce.

**In his book, *Cubist Aesthetic Theories*.

Chagalls, Klees, Blakes, Redons, Ryders, Maleviches, Pollocks, and their like.

No; I don't think you can transmute artists into semi-freaks this way — half-human and half something nobody-knows-what. The result, as I said, would be to cramp and emasculate both them and art itself.

Intuition (if you want to call it that, instead of imagination) isn't the exclusive property of any one kind of man. The artist's intuition can be remarkable, no doubt, but so can be the physician's "intuition" of his patient's symptoms, the politician's "intuition" of public opinion, the general's "intuition" of what the enemy is going to do next. There are too many varieties (and overlappings) in intuition for the artist's intuition to be of the completely unique (and even miraculous) type which is implied by this theory of an entirely separate "Realm of Artists."

This is not to deny that by thus transmuting artists into prodigies — or at least by making them think they had been thus transmuted — something useful might be accomplished.

Plenty of artists, I admit, have worked themselves (often self-consciously) into this state of mind and have succeeded — perhaps even as a result of it — in producing notable art works.

But this does not prove that intuition is the answer to a problem.

It proves only that almost any excursion into eccentricity (as I explained earlier) can produce pleasing results — at least temporarily. Convince any artist, for example, that he is a reincarnation of Adam (or Eve) with an obligation to express man's "primitive innocence", and there is a fair

chance that he will paint something interesting and even exciting. But again the benefits would be only temporary — and would last only until enough art works had been produced in that mood to destroy the novelty of it.

In fact, unless he had previously (and wrongly) been imbued with "principles", it would not occur to him that there was anything especially "eccentric" in this "eccentricity". It would simply have been the way in which his particular "freedom of action" chanced to demonstrate itself.

In other words, intuition is merely *the generator of a style* — much the same as have been cubism, or futurism or abstraction.

I therefore suggest to the artist — in the furtherance of his own freedom of action — that he adopt an attitude of neutrality towards intuition.

Let him *encourage* his own intuition when he desires to attain those effects which intuition is most likely to produce — as for example, those shown on pages 51 and 53. But let him not become addicted to the habit.

Let him also be prepared to choose an opposite procedure when his purposes are correspondingly opposite. Let him then say to himself "No hunches for me today. For this job I'm going to be methodical and cautious. Every brush-stroke will be logically thought out in advance."

The chances of "being a great artist" are just as good one way as another — unless one way happens to have been over-exploited at the moment, as, I am inclined to believe, the intuition-way has recently been over-exploited in some forms of abstract-expressionism.



Appendix A

Conglomeration of Frauds

As to how many individual frauds the Metropolitan Museum's *Seminars in Art* must be proved to contain before you will concede that I have correctly characterized the seminars as *themselves a fraud*, *in toto*, is a matter you must decide for yourself.

To my way of thinking, the number of them which I have already placed before you in the main text should be enough to achieve that end. But in case you are still unconvinced, I present you an additional exhibit herewith.

This by no means exhausts the supply, but it should sufficiently boost your capacity to be an "aesthetics cop" (similar to the fellow I introduced in Chapter VI) so that you can immediately recognize the remaining ones by yourself.

In most cases the frauds group themselves naturally in certain categories.

To illustrate, let me start with a series of them which can be classified as Frauds of Indefinition — wherein the word "beautiful" is used as though everybody knew exactly what it meant. Two especially glaring examples of this malpractice are cited in Chapter IV (The Conflict Picture) in relation to paintings by Rouault and Corot.

Here are three more, as exemplified in the comments (all by Mr. John Canaday and from the seminars) which I show you under Figures 1, 2, and 3, and applicable to the art works reproduced in those figures.

The first comment illustrates the fraud in its maximum of indefinition. Not only does Mr. Canaday fail to give any hint as to what concept of "beautiful" he has in mind, but he confers the award without the least explanation of what makes this particular woman's figure "beautiful" or why it is any more or any less beautiful than a hundred thousand others in a hundred thousand other paintings.

The implication is, of course, that Mr. Canaday's *trained eye** has somehow penetrated to "ultimate truth" — and that if you persevere in studying the Museum's "course of instruction" (and if you also possess the requisite "gift of sensitivity") you will end up with the same uncanny ability.

Having reached these concluding pages I can only hope that you are now impregnable to this stale trick.

*Actually an eye which can truthfully be characterized as "trained", is an eye which can discern high degrees of complexity, independently of beauty.



Figure 1

This figure is *beautiful in itself* in spite of the strained artificiality of attitude. John Canaday, in *Seminars of Art*.



Figure 2

A jousting accident had cost the duke his right eye and broken the nose in a face already swarthy and far from ideally beautiful. But Piero took the ruined profile, the coarse hair, even the warts on the face, and patterned them into a design revealing the strength, decision, intelligence and abstract beauty — for, as drawn by Piero, the line of the duke's profile has become *abstractly beautiful*. . . . John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.



Figure 3

The wavering line of the bottom of the apron is one of the least conspicuous but most successful bits of design in the whole arrangement. Its gentle movement relieves the stiffness of the lower part of the figure without competing in interest with the upper part, where the face, drawn in profile with skillful delicacy, must hold its own against the strong pattern. We have no way of knowing how accurate the drawing is as a likeness — it somehow looks very convincing — but the line is *beautiful in itself*. John Canaday in *Seminars in Art*.

The next two comments — applicable to the art works shown in Figures 2 and 3, might be regarded as less preposterous, in one sense, in that (by their focusing on smaller elements, *mere lines*) they don't attempt so much; but more preposterous, in another sense, in that the observer has better opportunity to make an actual test of their truth — somewhat as follows:

I take Mr. Canaday's two "miracle lines", let us say, and separate them from their environments — as I am warranted in doing since the first one is described as "abstractly beautiful" and the second one as being "beautiful in itself". Then I mix them

For the next kind of fraud let's revert to Character Revelation. I have chosen to go into this old fake again largely because — in spite of the cases which I illustrated in Chapter II — you may not have realized how widely Mr. Canaday (and, of course, a thousand other critics) has had the audacity to continue using it regardless of the fact that to inform himself of its complete invalidity nothing more would be required of him than a glance at the encyclopedia.

The "story", for instance, which Mr. Canaday invents about the Bellelli family (see Figure 5) has a plausible ring, true enough — but only to the



Figure 4. Parlor Game for a Rainy Afternoon

Decide which lines are "beautiful" and which are not. For "correct" answers, see previous page.

in (see Figure 4) with a miscellaneous assortment of other lines, drawn mostly at random.

You are thus enabled (as you were not, in the case of the woman's figure) to bring your powers of observation into direct operation and endeavor to see what particular qualities (if any) Mr. Canaday's two lines possessed which would justify his singling them out as especially worthy to win an eternal valuation as "beautiful". My contention, of course, is that no such particular qualities exist. Some lines might possess a greater (or less) speed of tiring, others might momentarily (and accidentally) attract you more, but none to the extent that would justify you in referring to it as being either "abstractly beautiful" or "beautiful in itself".

unsonhisticated observer. To the less romantically minded fellow (and particularly to the "aesthetics cop") it's plainly just another flossy gag concocted for the occasion and requiring from thirty to ninety seconds for a proper coordination into words.

The mother, for instance, could just as well be standing in a dream world of frustration as standing with "dignity, decision, and forbearance"; the little girl at the left could easily be the "volatile member of the family" (instead of her sister) as indicated by her "nervously clenched" hands and by the need for a "restraining" clasp from her mother to keep her still. And there is no reason for saying

(Continued on page 128)

All this is "Educationally Sound," says the Metropolitan Museum!!



Figure 5. The Bellelli Family, Degas

Superlatives are dangerous, but there is less danger than usual in describing *The Bellelli Family* as the finest psychological group portrait ever painted. The temperament of each of the four members is individualized for us, and, beyond that, their interrelationship is revealed. . . . He (the father) is the only one of the family who is not completely revealed to us as a person. He has a life beyond this room; perhaps he leads a life more important to him than the life we are seeing here; he is an outsider. But this vagueness, incompleteness and isolation are reversed in the figure of the wife. She stands with dignity, decision and forbearance, dominating the room by her quietness. . . . She (the daughter at right) sits restlessly, one leg tucked up under her, as if impatient with sitting for her artist cousin, unable to remain still, the volatile member of the group. Just as she is divided in her loyalty to her mother and her father, so she does not belong wholly to either in the composition of the painting. John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

Irrelevant Nonsense!

Interpretations (or whimsies) such as these have no importance whatever *unless widely confirmed by other people*. Against a hundred similarly "ingenious" interpretations — and they could easily be invented in that quantity — Mr. Canaday's would do no better than the others.



Enlarged Reproduction of
The Shepherd

Just what guesses most people would make as to the inward emotions which prompted this man's facial expression is hard to say, but — assuming their ignorance of the painting's subject — I doubt if Mr. Canaday could get a three per cent concurrence on his "interpretation". Such guesses as: "there goes my horse up to (or back to) third place"; or "there's that same man with my best girl again," would be equally logical. And if my comments seem irreverent, let me insist that Van der Goes, and other old masters, are not benefited, but hurt, by having phony adulation of this sort forced on them. And, of course, hurt most of all is the man who is taken in by it.



At his best he (George Moore) was a graceful stylist, at his worst a poseur guilty of pretentious persiflage. Manet did other drawings of him, always with the same acute perspicacity that marks the pastel of our illustration. One wonders if Moore realized how *nakedly his nature was revealed* in them. John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

George Moore had no cause to worry. Plenty of men — including Bismarck, Trollope, Whistler, Maeterlinck, Rodin or Sir Walter Scott would have got along as well with his face as with their own, I assure you. Nobody would have noticed anything wrong with it.



Adoration of the Shepherds, Van der Goes

The third shepherd is a lout — snub-nosed, gap-toothed, raw-boned, and coarse-haired. But he is equally aware that he is in the presence of miracle, just as he will be equally the recipient of salvation through the child. He leans forward in amazement; *his face is filled with joy and reverence and almost with fright*. He dares lean no closer, but his eyes start with *wild curiosity* as he strains forward. *No head in the history of painting, of any period, surpasses this one in psychological revelation, through explicitly realistic representation*. John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.

(Continued from page 126)

that the other little girl is "divided in her loyalty to the mother and father" except to give seeming force to Mr. Canaday's theories of what the composition of a picture (in this case its being divided into two parts by the vertical line of the fireplace) accomplishes in the revelation of character.

The last fraud — about the painting by Cot, illustrated in Figure 6 is, I think, the most obviously fraudulent of all. It could be described as the *Teacher-Knows-Best*, or *Verdict-From-on-High Fraud*. Although very common in the seminars, it is an extremely risky kind to use because (even, as in this case, with the authority of the Metropolitan Museum behind it) it requires an almost fantastic degree of subservience and stupidity in its prospective "vicitims" for any chance of its being accepted by them.

After all, very few men (if any) need to go to college (or subscribe to the *Seminars in Art*) to find out whether or not people look as if they are running. I doubt very much if Mr. Canaday could get an appreciable number of persons to accept his dictum that the boy and the girl in the picture "remain forever on tiptoe" any more than that the discus thrower (in Figure 7) or the ballet dancer (in Figure 8) remain forever in the poses which they happen to occupy. The public is aware of the difference between a painting (or sculpture) and a moving picture and is willing to make the necessary mental allowances for that difference. Very possibly Cot, if he had wished, could have made the two figures look as if they were running faster, but there seems no aesthetic reason requiring him to give them one speed more than another.

But to assert *positively* that "there is no expression of flight" is simply a bit of gangster-like strong-arming at which even a moron would rebel.

The only accounting for it which I can see is that Mr. Canaday had run out of reasons to explain why the Cot picture was inferior and this ancient objurgation struck him as good enough to use in this spot.

* * * * *

As you attempt to evaluate this assortment of comments, let me point out that inexcusable as they are in themselves they are inexcusable mostly because what's wrong with them is the same as what's wrong with the seminars as a whole — namely, that they are not education — nor even an approximation to it.

Any man who regarded himself seriously as a teacher would rather, I believe, keep an ace up his sleeve in a poker game, pass off rubber checks on his friends, shoplift a couple of fur coats for his girl, and serve up to three years in jail than make himself responsible for the conglomeration of whimsies, prevarications, wild guesses, and pipe-dreams which abound in the seminars.

Education — unlike art — is committed to a certain tone. Statements must be made with care and after proper efforts to verify their accuracy.

The seminars are completely lacking in that tone. They are not at all an impartial and scholarly analysis of a subject. They are propaganda — a biased

and partisan harangue to support and validate what might be termed *The Official Dogma of the Art Museum* — which is, of course, that art is immortal.

Or, to phrase the same statement in words which express my own personal opinion, they are an effort to prevent the exposure of that dogma for what it really is — to wit, a worn-out bit of humbug, carried over from the Dark Ages, which has been the main force in keeping art criticism in its present state of quackery.



Figure 6. The Storm, Pierre Cot

"For all the signposts such as billowing drapery and bodily attitudes pointing out that the figures are supposed to be running, there is no expression of flight. The lovers remain forever on tiptoe." John Canaday, in *Seminars in Art*.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Now, in case you are appalled at my using such words as “fraud” and “quackery” in connection with anything that the Metropolitan Museum might do, let me say that it’s because you fail to realize how easy it is for an art institution (or any institution) to make what was originally a small (and excusable) mistake and eventually find itself so committed to that mistake — so “ossified” inside it — that to find a way out is either impossible or requires a greater display of courage than is available.

For reasons which I shall explain later (in Appendix C) there was a time in history when it was natural — perhaps even pardonable — for men to accept the old superstition about art being immortal. And under the control and protection of that superstition it was understandable that art museums should be founded for the purpose of storing (and purchasing at high prices) such art works as supposedly possessed this quality of immortalism.

Okay; let’s forgive them for their error.

The question is, though: how are they to get themselves out of it, without tearing things too dangerously apart.

To disavow the immortality of art would not only cause irreparable damage to their own prestige, but would take away from them the long-established “excuse” for expending hundreds of thousands — and even millions — of dollars for a single art work, i.e., its immortality. And they would have to admit freely (and truthfully) that such fantastic prices were being paid not because of any educational or aesthetic value in the paintings themselves, as

Difficult Choice

Assuming that a certain critic has been selected to write the Metropolitan Museum’s *Seminars in Art*, and that, while doing so, a seemingly clever idea occurs to him, as, for example, that the line of a man’s profile is “abstractly beautiful” or that a boy and a girl, supposedly depicted as running, do not actually appear to be running, but, instead, appear to be “frozen forever on tip-toe”, then which of the following two methods of procedure should he adopt?

Method 1. Should he remind himself that he is speaking for a famous institution, check the accuracy of his idea with extra care, and perhaps even obtain the reaction of other persons to his idea — and, if the idea turns out to be erroneous — should he ruthlessly suppress it, remarking to himself: “how near I came to making a bad mistake that time” and should he then resolve to redouble his precautions in the future, or

Method 2. Should he decide that the idea was too clever to be omitted and that the poor saps who read the seminars wouldn’t know the difference anyhow, and therefore let the idea go in?

A man never knows when he may be called on to make tough decisions like this.

“art”, but because of the competition between collectors (private or professional) who were often acting, either from snobbery (to show how rich and great they were), or from the same speculative motives as guided them in making purchases on the stock exchange.

Well, that’s it. Museums are in a very tight spot. How they are going to get out of it and bring themselves up abreast with the times will require a lot of careful thinking.

* * * * *

The frauds which I have cited above are ones as to whose fraudulence you can satisfy yourself with no great difficulty, I think.

Let me show you a couple more, now, which may require of you some decidedly heavier thinking. All I can do is present you with circumstantial evidence and then let you draw your own conclusion. They involve paintings by Eakins and Chardin — as reproduced in figures 9 and 10.

Let’s begin with the Eakins, about which Mr. Canaday comments as follows:

“As a group, the five men and two little girls . . . compose a frieze of rhythmic unity and variety that should be impossible, or at least disharmonious, when its units are studied in their commonplaceness and their naturalness. . . . Yet there is not a line, an attitude, a relationship that we could change without disrupting the balanced harmony.”

My first complaint (a minor one) is that there is no reason why the units here (five men and two little girls) should be any more difficult to “compose,” when “studied in their commonplaceness and naturalness” than are the equal number of units in the Chardin, when similarly studied. Mr. Canaday’s remarks — like so many others of his and other critics — is merely a casual idea which



Figure 9, Eakins

flashed into his mind and was used because it served the purpose. The purpose, in this case, was to show how *difficult* a job of giving "rhythmic unity" Eakins had achieved.

However, much more objectionable is the last sentence — that nothing in the picture could be changed "without disrupting the balanced harmony." I am thoroughly convinced, in my own mind, that it's completely false — that, in actuality, a hundred changes could be made without doing any harm at all.

In support of my contention, I present you, on the opposite page a series of six "compositions".

In one of them (Composition B) the five men and two little girls are in the same arrangement that Eakins gave them. In the others they are in different arrangements. It's for you to decide whether you do or do not agree with me that the changes *don't disrupt a thing*. In the tests which I myself conducted, no one arrangement was given any substantial preference over the others. Compo-



Figure 10, Chardin; Original



Variant

sition C was slightly the most popular of the six, and Eakins' composition averaged third in popularity; but the preference is insignificant.

Next, here is Mr. Canaday's comment on the Chardin:

"The seven objects in our illustration are arranged very simply on the homely shelf but very rightly. There are no set rules for this kind of pictorial composition and thus no really good way to explain why one succeeds or fails.* The objects are placed in a kind of balance that cannot be calculated but can only "feel" right or *wrong*. The simpler such an arrangement is and the fewer the objects included in it the more difficult is the problem of adjustment of the parts to one another. You can test this arrangement by imagining it without the knife. Immediately the mug is divorced from the other objects. Or if we substitute another apple for the pear or shift the position of the pear so that it leans toward the center of the picture rather than toward the left, we discover that we have to make other changes to compensate for the disturbed relationships."

To me, it is equally fraudulent, but again I can only report, for instance, that slightly more people liked the pear leaning towards the center — as in the Variant — than leaning towards the left — as in the original.

The popular "reason" for this preference was (regrettably) that "the pear stayed in the picture", instead of "falling out of it," as in Chardin's arrangement.

Of course this "reason" as I have tried to show (page 25) is not valid. Neither "staying in a picture" or "falling out of it", is necessarily either good or bad. Unfortunately, however, the people whom I consulted were victims of the phony "education" which critics have been delivering for so long and fell naturally into the flashy language which goes with it.

I do not wish to imply by this that it makes no great difference what arrangement you might choose. It would be easy enough to make so "eccentric" an arrangement that its high speed of tiring would be impractical for use in a painting which was intended to have a sufficient resistance to reiteration to justify being hung on a wall in your home; but there is no single one-best-way.

*Very true, but an effort to estimate speed of tiring often helps.

A Question Every Critic Must Ask Himself

How idiotic am I willing to make myself in order to maintain the notion that fatigue has nothing to do with art, and thus avoid "Ethical Nihilism"?

A reading of the comments quoted in this book should tell you how he answers it.



A



B



C



D



E



F

Of which of these compositions can it be said that “there is not a line, an attitude, a relationship that we could change without disintegrating the balanced harmony”?

Appendix B

A Correspondence with the Metropolitan Museum

With a practical lesson for you (or any Man) in how to avoid answering an awkward question.

It seems that when our exposure of the nonsensicality of "character-revelation" as a test of a portrait's greatness first appeared in the magazine *CRITICAL* (substantially as it now appears in Chapter II of this book) a subscriber to the museum's *Seminars in Art* wrote the following letter to the museum:

I have been studying your seminars of Art with great pleasure and benefit for the last few months. However, a day or two ago I came across a magazine which has greatly disturbed me. It is called *CRITICAL*, and I picked it up at a newsstand here. As you will see, it makes some very strong charges against some of the things you say in your course. I suppose it's wrong but to me some of the points seem to be well taken. Perhaps you will enlighten me so that I can continue my study confidently.

Nothing overly rude or alarming in the wording, is there?

But consider now the fulmination, diatribe, castigation and bawling-out (see facing page) which it produced. A collaboration of Demosthenes, Xanthippe, Jove and Huey Long could do no better. Outraged rectitude, injured innocence and, above all, impregnable authority sang out (*seemingly*) from every sentence.

To assert that it might easily be one of the ten most supercilious and cocky epistles written so far in the twentieth century would not be unreasonable. You will notice, however, that it completely evades the issue (see circled words in letter) as to the validity of character revelation to test the "greatness" of a portrait.

The subscriber should no doubt have seen that further attempts to get an honest answer would be time wasted. However, misled by the writer's offer to comment more specifically and believing that an institution such as the Metropolitan would be incapable of deliberate evasion, the subscriber tried once more, thus:—

Dear Mr. Davidson:—

Thanks very much for your letter replying to the criticism brought against the Metropolitan Seminars by the magazine, *CRITICAL*.

I have given much thought to your remarks because — as with all your subscribers, no doubt — I am very serious in my desire to obtain full benefit from the education which it is the purpose of the Seminars to impart.

There is at least one comment in your letter, however, where it seems to me you are not entirely sincere. So, inasmuch as you promised to be more specific if I wished it, I shall take you at your word and ask for additional information.

I refer to the following sentence in your letter:

'Contrary to the first few points raised by *CRITICAL*, Mr. Canaday by no means makes the revelation of personality in a portrait study the sole criterion of a painting's merit and interest.'

But on again checking the article in *CRITICAL* I see that the article nowhere states that revelation of personality is Mr. Canaday's *sole* criterion. It merely states that it is an *impossible* and therefore *fallacious* criterion. Perhaps this seeming insincerity on your part was unintentional, and if so won't you give further particulars in order that I may understand why *CRITICAL* is wrong in condemning this criterion, and why Mr. Canaday is right in using it.

As it is now, I am left with the impression — and I hope you will pardon my saying so — that you are not too happy over Mr. Canaday's employment of the criterion and are sort of dodging the issue by saying that it is not his sole criterion.

Another matter that disturbs me is Mr. Canaday's basing the superiority of Renoir's portrait of Madame Renoir over Ingres' portrait of Madame LeBlanc on the ground that Ingres tells us nothing more about Madame LeBlanc than 'that she was a member of the prosperous upper middle class' whereas Renoir — according to Mr. Canaday — has painted Madame Renoir with the 'deeper meaning' of *woman as an earth goddess*.

Is this intended to be taken seriously?

And if so, how about subscribers (like myself) who simply can't read this 'deeper meaning' into the portrait? To me — and I believe to many of your subscribers — there is a dignity, depth and humanity in Madame LeBlanc's face which comes much nearer to suggesting 'woman as an earth goddess' than anything readable from the face of Madame Renoir. I wish you would carefully study the two portraits, one against the other, and see if you do not agree.

Does this indicate a lack of sensitivity on our part or is it merely that we are different individuals, possessing different (and conceivably better trained) capacities for interpreting character than has Mr. Canaday. Are we to throw away our own discernments in order to conform with those of our 'teacher'?

On the other hand, if Mr. Canaday's interpretation is not to be taken seriously what is the purpose of his so greatly stressing it? And — especially — what becomes of the criterion by which he proclaims the superiority of the Renoir portrait?

I would be much obliged if you would explain these matters to me; as it is rather disturbing to have one's faith in the authority and scholarship of the course shaken at so early a stage.

Thanking you again, I am

Yours sincerely

Another courteous and straightforward letter, is it not; merely asking for an honest answer to a simple question?

There is little need, perhaps to present you the response it brought, but you will find it in full, adjoining the first letter. The fact that the writer brought in a coadjutor to support him may seem significant to you. Obviously however, the letter's purpose, as before, is not to answer the subscriber's

COPY
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK 28, N. Y.

2nd November 1959

Dear ~~Mr. Canaday~~

Your letter of October 24th with the attached copy of Critical has come to my desk. I had never heard of this little publication, although it is roughly similar to others I have seen, most of which seek an audience for a personal point of view that is too eccentric to be considered seriously by a responsible press.

I would gather from the few pages of the leaflet you sent me that the author has not read the Metropolitan Seminars very attentively and that he is not well informed about the matters he discusses. I say this because his assumptions are hasty and inaccurate and because his conclusions lack any apparent judgment.

In the first place, the Museum staff by no means shied away from "so dangerous a task" as preparing the Seminars; and the Museum does not stand "Machavellishly" aside from Mr. Canaday's performance. Quite the contrary on both points: Mr. Canaday, rather than a Museum staff member, was chosen as author of this important series of publications only after careful deliberation; and also, in spite of the fact that the choice was based on his knowledge, experience, independent critical acumen, and ability to communicate his ideas successfully, everything he has written has been carefully reviewed by qualified staff members. The Museum would not publish these texts if it did not respect Mr. Canaday's opinions and his right to them, as indeed do other authorities whom even such a sceptic as Mr. Shaw should consider responsible. This is very careless and prejudiced reporting on the part of Critical.

The rest of his statements seem to be about as incompetent, and I hesitate to take the time - yours and mine - to comment on them more specifically, although I will cheerfully do so if you wish me to. I might just mention in passing that, contrary to the first few points raised by Critical, Mr. Canaday by no means makes the revelation of personality in a portrait subject the sole criterion of a painting's merit and interest; his interpretations are not whimsical or capricious, but studied, sensitive, and documented; (referring to Mrs. Renoir as the portrait of a "jolly little dumbbell" is a sort of caprice that Mr. Shaw may find plausible but that would be unthinkable in the Seminars); and he reiterates his respect for craftsmanship as such throughout the Seminars (oddly enough in the cases of Bouguereau, Rosa Bonheur and David - among others, the artists Mr. Shaw notes as being held in contempt on this account).

This seems to be as far as Mr. Shaw read. Perhaps by reading further in the Seminars and more intelligently he might learn quite a bit that would qualify him better for his role of lonely critic of art criticism. In fact, from the ambiguous nature of his "conclusions", I believe this is precisely the sort of art education he is lacking, since he seems to be asking for what is covered point by point in portfolio after portfolio in definable terms and in concrete demonstrations.

Sincerely,

1st Letter

Marshall B. Davidson
Marshall B. Davidson
Editor of Publications

COPY
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
NEW YORK 28, N. Y.

26 February 1960

Dear ~~Mr. Canaday~~

I regret that you found my earlier letter lacking in sincerity. Under the circumstances I cannot believe that you will receive anything I say with much confidence, including the Introduction to the Seminars, in which I tried sincerely, I assure you - to suggest the broad answers to such questions as you pose. I trust that if you read this carefully you may understand I am not practising evasion and that I am not lacking in sincerity.

I believe you can afford to take Mr. Canaday seriously and that you can afford to disagree with him (see Introduction). There is nothing incompatible about the two notions. Fortunately, or unfortunately, artists of the past rarely revealed precisely what they may have intended to project in the mind of the audience. Any critic worth his salt will proffer his personal interpretation, based on facts where they are known or on his own trained understanding and sensibility where documentary evidence is lacking. I know for a certainty that Mr. Canaday is an exceptionally well endowed art critic and author with solid training, both academic and practical. His admirers are, on the whole, more distinguished and competent than his critics, and greater in number.

I have before me, for example, a copy of a long letter written to Mr. Shaw by a chairman of a college fine arts department in which, among many other things, he remarks, "Several of your recent issues have expounded at great length 'that . . . Canaday's . . . alleged test is a complete 100% fraud.' Your kind of loose critical thinking is in my humble opinion at least 200% fraud. The Metropolitan Seminars have attempted to provide certain criteria by which judgments can be made. They are, to be sure, in some measure personal. But this, in itself, is not an indictment of them . . . Your hammering away at the Metropolitan Museum and John Canaday creates more noise than dead ducks. If your aim is to be really Critical, then state your case."

I take the liberty of quoting this letter briefly since it reiterates what I wrote you earlier. Mr. Shaw's "criticisms" are purely destructive in intent, add nothing constructive to the argument, and, indeed, seem to observe no apparent criteria save his personal annoyance with what, among others, much better writers and gratified critics have essayed. I have not seen his more recent statements, but that is immaterial.

2nd Letter

Sincerely yours,

Marshall B. Davidson
Marshall B. Davidson
Editor of Publications

Which is the
Earth Goddess?



Renoir



Ingres

questions but merely to give as good a pretence as possible of having done so.

And yet, if the Museum felt itself on solid ground, how unnecessary all this shadowboxing is. How easy it would be for the Museum to answer the subscriber's complaint by saying (if it were true, and it should have been) that Mr. Canaday — recognizing his obligation as a teacher to demonstrate that his statements were not merely personal whimsies — had made enough inquiries among representative and educated men to satisfy himself that most of them, if given the chance, would have had the same aesthetic reactions as himself on the points at issue.

Or if the Museum could not say that (and I am afraid it couldn't) then how simple (again) it would have been to apologize to the subscriber, admit that the mistake had slipped in by accident and promise that it would be corrected in the next edition.

No great harm would come to the Museum's prestige through confessing to such an "inadvertency" — if that were truly what it was.

What disturbed the Museum, no doubt, was its realization, not only that no logical answer to the subscriber's questions was possible, but that simil-

arly careless and irresponsible statements (as I have shown you) were numerous throughout the seminars, and that once it started attempting to give answers there would be no end to it.

What Seven Minutes of Investigation Would Do!

It would reveal that Physiognomy (or Character Revelation) is described in modern encyclopaedias as a pseudoscience — such as Phrenology; and that systematic studies of it in recent years (R. C. Sommerville, in 1924; D. G. Paterson, in 1930) have produced exclusively "negative" results. Nobody takes it seriously any more except persons who haven't bothered to investigate and want to use it to trick you.

In fact, exercising my own rights to make "character interpretations" strictly as personal guesses, I am inclined to suspect, from "reading between the lines" in Mr. Davidson's letters that he himself is extremely dubious about it, and is concealing his doubts out of loyalty to the Metropolitan Museum.

In which connection, it may interest you to know that some eighteen months after the date of Mr. Davidson's last letter the Metropolitan was still soliciting subscriptions to its seminars on the strength of how *educationally sound* they were.

Appendix C

Battle of the Nihilisms

Now for a final word as to the chaos, nihilism, anarchy, and hell on earth which critics claim would be the inevitable result of man's accepting the concept of art outlined in this book.

And let's begin by meeting the critics' attack (in the classic tradition) with a couple of sharp counter-attacks.

First, we ask sarcastically: what could conceivably be more anarchistic — what could be a more complete throwing away of law and order — a more complete collapse into nothingness than that which follows from denying the existence of fatigue — as exemplified by the bedlam of self-contradiction, tomfoolery, and nonsense which I have cited for you in these pages.

And second, we state firmly (and with at least seventy-five per cent truth, I believe) that what critics really object to is not the nihilism of my concept but the fact that an acceptance of it might easily reduce by a good one-half the amount of space critics would be allowed to use* for explaining why this, that, or the other art work was "right", "wrong", or somewhere in between; with disastrous results to the number of jobs available in criticism as well as to the rate of remuneration for those jobs.

Critics are not idealists searching earnestly and altruistically for "fundamental truth". Snap yourself out of any such delusion. They are opportunists, with a living to make, taking the easiest way to do it and getting fun out of attracting attention to themselves.

Having brought these two counter-attacks I am now willing to concede a certain (rather small) amount of nihilism in my picturing of art. But its presence there, though regrettable, is by no means a fatal defect — for the reason that there's no way to avoid it.

Nihilism is everywhere. It's difficult to discuss any problem at all (at a higher level than what necktie to wear today) without some of the obnoxious stuff creeping in despite one's best

efforts. And nothing is gained by pretending otherwise.

Therefore, what confronts you is not a decision (regardless of critics' efforts to make you think it is) as to whether you want to risk moving into *any kind of nihilism at all*, but is a decision as to whether you want to reside in the hectic, fussed-up nihilism which critics have themselves manufactured and want to drag you into — let's call it *Mystic Nihilism* — or prefer to live in what might be termed *Natural Nihilism*.

Natural nihilism is the kind everybody starts out with. You get into it by acquiring what is called "knowledge"; in learning that if you drop something on your toe *it hurts*; that if you heat water to a certain temperature *it boils*; that the moon is a particular number of miles away from earth; that man evolved from lower forms of life; and so on.

Many a man lives his entire life without ever finding out he had been in nihilism. Others discover it fairly early. It's just a question of whether or not (and how soon) they chance to bump up against some of life's "metaphysical snags".

One of them is in the contradiction between "free will" and "fatalism" (or the strict basing of life on cause and effect); another is between an "Omnipotent God" and "sin". They are numerous; as also are the expedients by which men endeavor to adjust their minds to them.

Now, far be it from me to recommend or even suggest any one way for you to solve the problem. My only desire is to prevent art critics from using the existence of the problem as a sort of Bogie Man to frighten you into their particular mode of thought, *Mystic Nihilism*, as though it weren't nihilism at all but a snug harbor where everything was serene and neatly arranged.

To illustrate, let's have a few words with an astronomer.

We start by asking him which concept he accepts — that of an infinite universe, ending nowhere and without any outside limitation at all; or that of an "enclosed" universe with a boundary around it beyond which exists something nobody has yet thought up a name for.

It's a basic problem, is it not, and the fact that the astronomer, at present, has no solution throws a certain doubt on a number of related concepts ("space", "distance", etc.) which he is employing every day? I doubt, however, if the astronomer would be greatly disturbed by such a question. He would simply respond calmly: "We'll come to that problem later. In the meanwhile, let's go on working with what we've got."

The mystic-minded fellow, however (an art critic, perhaps), determined to eradicate "nihilism" would fly into a terrific rage at any such procrastinating and indefinite a policy. His first act would be to fill the void with some plausible-sounding theory he dreamed up by himself; and his second act, when the astronomer exposed the absurdity of the theory, would be to accuse the astronomer of being a low, degenerate nihilist trying to degrade all mankind into an immoral chaos.

The purpose of this "parable" is to bring home three facts to you:

*As confirmed in the following confession by two well-known critics: "The disadvantage of a pleasure view is that it offers us too restricted a vocabulary. We need fuller terms with which to describe the value of art works." Ogden and Richards, *The Foundation of Aesthetics*.

First, that you can't escape one nihilism by plunging overboard into a bigger (and sillier) one.

Second, that the existence of "natural nihilism" in a human activity does not require the abandonment of that activity — because, if it did, there wouldn't be any activities left at all for men to engage in.

Third, that it's well to choose for your activity one in which the nihilism is not painfully obtrusive, and in which there is not only scope for continual intellectual progress but also a possibility that the degree or severity of the nihilism can gradually be reduced.

To bring out this point let me say that I can visualize an astronomer as working along comfortably enough in his job — four days out of five, say — in spite of the regrettable contradictions (e.g., the enclosure versus non-enclosure of the universe) with which "natural nihilism" occasionally dispirits him. There is ample room for him to extend his knowledge of astronomy in spite of that contradiction.

Whereas I find it difficult to imagine an art critic as in anything but a constant state of pain and frustration as he is compelled (not once in a while, but continuously, day after day) to enunciate the niggling, petty, puerile priggeries which his kind of nihilism (the mystic kind) demands of him. For, by denying the pertinency of Fatigue (with its unlimited range for study and investigation) he has deliberately shut himself inside a prison in which there is nothing for him to do (now or ever) except to toss aimlessly about the assortment of phony "standards" (see cartoon, page 118) he has recklessly chosen to justify himself by.

That's the astronomer.

Next, let's take a look at a certain physician, who — in common with his colleagues — chances to hold the reprehensible (to critics) doctrine that there is nothing man can't get too much of. The advice he gives to his patients often runs somewhat as follows.

To Patient A he says, "You're over-working, take a good long rest in bed;" to Patient B he says, "Stop dawdling in that wheelchair, go out and get some exercise," to Patient C he remarks, "Watch your health, my friend, it's the best thing you've got," to Patient D he remarks, "There's not a thing wrong with you, stop watching your health;" to Patient E he says, "I don't care how much you love your children, you need a good vacation away from them; why don't you go south for a couple of weeks and just lie in the sun; but don't overdo it, with your skin-type you could easily get a dangerous burn." And so on.

As you see, it is excess, overdoing, lack of moderation against which the doctor is in a never-ending battle. Fatigue with its two opposing danger zones — boredom and exhaustion — is his eternal enemy. And this is true not only in obvious cases — as in the headache, the chest-pain, the nervous breakdown — but also in the broken leg or appendectomy, wherein the doctor is simultaneously concerned with furnishing the complete rest needed by one

section of his patient's body without causing a deterioration in other sections from *too much rest*.

Attempt to Define Art

Art is what men create in order to rest those sections of their nerve systems which are tired and to activate those sections which are not tired.

In other words — remembering the definition of art I ventured earlier (as repeated above) — it might be said that a physician differs from an "artist" only in the fact that the art works (or "prescriptions") he "creates" are usually directed specifically to single individuals rather than "wholesale" to groups (large or small) of men in general.

The analogy between the two is very close. Both are working together for mankind's health and well-being, and they are doing it through their careful control of Fatigue.

Now if you ask me how it happens that it is only the artist (or critic) — never the physician — who is scolded for thus "minding his own business", for not concerning himself with profounder problems (e.g. ethics and "Basic Truth") and for thereby backsliding into nihilism, I think I can give you the answer. It's because the physician has been more successful in eliminating the quack (or mystic) from his profession than the art critic has from his. And if you then ask me to explain that difference in success I will say that it is on account of difference in *difficulty of doing*.

To throw the quacks out of medicine was easy compared to the job it will be to get them out of art criticism. This does not mean that it cannot be done — as I shall demonstrate shortly.

And let me begin by making the assertion that every branch of human knowledge *starts* as a quackery. It *has* to.

As men begin to get glimmerings of knowledge on a certain subject (geology, physics, chemistry, etc.) it is natural to fill in the gaps in their knowledge with various myths, guesses, and suppositions. Inventing a myth is not only fun in itself but the man who invents an especially plausible-sounding one often derives personal advantages from his having done so — which, of course, he doesn't want to lose, with the result that it isn't long before a war develops between the persons who (at any one date in history) are well satisfied with the myth that is then in control — and, therefore, don't want any more knowledge brought in — and the persons who are *not* satisfied and *do* want more knowledge brought in. Or to put it more bluntly, a war soon develops between "quacks" and "honest men".

Imagine, for example, the pride and joy which was felt by the chap who first thought up the idea that men's sicknesses and pains were the result of a devil having lodged himself in their bodies. What satisfaction it must have been to him to see the idea take hold, to observe doctors all over the world spouting incantations to "cast out" the miscreants. And what a disappointment when it all collapsed.

There have been any number of such wars in history — some of them short, some of them long, depending on how strongly entrenched the quacks were and how much time was needed to gather the ammunition (i.e., knowledge) required to blast them out.

However, the wars have all ended in defeat for the quacks and if today's "quacks of art criticism" are trying to make themselves think that somehow it will be different with them, they had better change their minds fast.

Let them consider, for instance, the fate of astrologers.

Nobody could have been in a softer spot than were those boys — as recently as the fifteenth century. For any man — even an Emperor — to have embarked on a project of any importance, without having a horoscope taken as to the prospects of the project's success would have been considered ridiculous.

All was dandy with them. And then, almost without warning, the telescope was invented, Galileo and Copernicus chanced to arrive on earth and, suddenly nothing remained for astrologers to do except hunt up another way to support themselves and their families.

Two hundred years later approximately the same thing happened to the lads who were upholding the quackery which then had biology in its grip — as expressed in the wide assortment of fables about the instantaneous (and supposedly recent) creation of man by a supernatural act. Their authority was unshakable, it seemed.

Whereupon, Darwin had the audacity to be born (and, with an "assist" from Lamarck and a few others), gathered facts which had been lying around for centuries waiting for somebody to take the trouble of looking; and goodbye to another lot of charlatans.

There is nothing in the least abnormal in such a pattern of events. With the number of men on earth constantly increasing, with the continuous growth of their intellectual capacity, and with all the fellows scurrying around with their eyes and ears open, what else could happen!

As to whether there exists what might be called a "natural order" in which various quackeries might be expected to explode with the passage of time, I should hesitate to guess. A "probability trend" does seem to exist, however, depending on what might be termed each quackery's degree of "primitivism". The quackery involved in visualizing the earth as a flat disk covered with a perforated dome (through the holes in which an exterior light was shining) would "naturally" die, it seems, sooner than alchemy, for example; and alchemy might die before phrenology. The discovery of the X-ray seems "naturally" a "later" discovery than the telescope, and nuclear fission a later one than the X-ray, and so on.

The essential for the eradication of a quackery, appears always to be the same, however — namely, the *expansion of knowledge*. As soon as the non-quack learns how to do useful things which the quack *can't* do, the quack is through.

Take medicine, for instance. So long as *nobody* knew why wounds sometimes wouldn't heal or why eyes sometimes coated over, or why men sometimes had sharp pains in the lower right-hand parts of their stomachs, the voodooist and witch doctor flourished mightily. But when physicians solved these problems — when they learned how to *prevent* the infection of wounds, when they learned how to remove cataracts from the eyes, when they learned to perform appendectomies with a ninety per cent likelihood of success, then the quack doctor was definitely *out*.

And what a riddance it *was*.

Now, I shall not claim that man ever reached a stage where quackery is completely eliminated from any branch of knowledge; because more knowledge is always on the way. Nevertheless, I believe a stage is ultimately reached when a solid enough "base" of knowledge has been established so that the experts in that branch are no longer afraid (or are at least *less* afraid) of new knowledge and are willing, therefore, to examine each new idea that comes along according to its own merits and without prejudice. Geology, astronomy, medicine seem, for instance, to have attained that status, and there are many others.

Having drawn this picture for you of how quackeries are born and how they all come, in their turns, to a natural death, I shall risk the assertion which I have been leading up to — namely, that man's knowledges have now expanded to a degree at which the gradual exterminating of the quackery of art criticism (as at present conducted, of course) may be undertaken, with good prospects of success.

That it is a much tougher job than was the eradication of medicine's quackery, it would be foolish to deny.

To analyze and coordinate what is happening inside a man's mind is clearly more difficult than to analyze what's happening in all other segments of his body, combined. There are dark corners and secret passages wherein his emotions can conceal themselves — and there is often a greater *need* for him to conceal them.

Let us not forget, however, that man has been acquiring a lot of experience in getting rid of quackeries lately, that he has therefore become more suspicious (I hope) of the permanence of *any* of them, and that he has decidedly better equipment for his task of extermination.

Lest you jump to the conclusion (though I don't think you will) that I shall now take the cover off a box, as it were, and show you *Valid Art Criticism* inside, all neatly organized for your efficient operation, I shall merely remind you of my having said earlier that on your completing this book you would be more confused about art than when you started.

All I can expect to do is convince you that the best policy to find out about art and art criticism is the same "best policy" that you employed to find out about botany, building suspension bridges, mineralogy, acoustics, hygiene, or sword-fishing — namely, to get busy on the job and pick up as many of the pertinent facts as you can find. To reject that policy, on the ground that it leads only to "materialism" or "ethical chaos", inevitably ends up in the

muddle of nonsense, of which I have cited you samples in these pages.

Don't interpret this — or anything said in this book — as a disparagement of Ethics. It is not meant that way.

If an artist desires to improve the morals of his fellow men it's his choice — just as it's his choice whether he paints a landscape, a portrait or an abstraction. No principle of right or wrong is involved, and the success or failure of his art work depends on the "untritiness" of his moral lesson (and its speed of tiring) just as it does in his giving any other particular flavor to his art work.*

Ethics is quite capable, I think, of taking care of itself without demanding anything more from art, artists and critics than that they do their best to supply a breed of robust, vigorous and intellectually progressive men upon whom Ethics can then impose its moral precepts for the greatest benefit of all concerned.

There seems to be no reason why Art — any more than Medicine — should be especially chosen as Ethics' right-hand-man and coadjutor. And the reason that critics believe (or pretend to believe) otherwise is that "under the wing" of that belief they can bring a rich dose of mysticism into art and thus maintain art in its present state of quackery.

It is hardly necessary for me to say again that the first step in transforming art criticism from a quackery into a legitimate profession is — figuratively speaking — to drive critics out of their "play-pen" (cartoon page 118) and get them circulating through the world as it is; doing their best (bit by bit) to overcome their present "cold shivers" at the sight of Fatigue, and to become thoroughly acquainted with it, as well as with its associated forces, Resemblance, Abstention, Distribution, and the rest.

Once they have resolutely excluded mysticism, there is no reason, I believe, why critics cannot gradually obtain for themselves (if not quite the solid status of the medical man) at least the status of the meteorologist — and learn to forecast men's responses to certain Art works (under certain conditions and stipulations, of course) with about the same accuracy that the meteorologist forecasts the weather; which isn't bad.

Perhaps the strongest influence in enabling them to bring about this reformation will be (as it was in medicine) their acquiring the ability to make "cures" which had previously been impossible.

The cures won't be as spectacular, no doubt, as were medicine's cures of Small Pox, Cholera, and Polio.

They will be "subtler" cures — accomplished by the observation and gradual correction of unbalances in men's nerve system, and by the expansion of men's capacities to appreciate. The opportunity to make them has been furnished (and to the discredit of critics) not by anything the critics themselves accomplished or even advocated (as you will see from the amazing comment by Critic Lewis

Mumford, which I have quoted on page 140) but by technological advances achieved in other branches of knowledge.

Consider the art of music, for instance. A hundred years ago, the great majority of (cultured) men were in an almost continuous state of nerve unbalance (and even frustration) in relation to the masterpieces of symphonic music. Opportunities to hear an expert rendition of them were rare and expensive — under which circumstances it was understandable, of course, that their "immortalism" should be widely accepted.

Today, the critic can prescribe a "cure" merely by referring his "patient" to a radio program or by giving him the address of a phonograph record shop.

Similarly, a man's nerve hungers for Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or for Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which formerly could be satisfied only by a trip to Florence or Dresden, can now be satisfied (with at least ninety per cent efficiency) by the critic's directing him to any one of a hundred art albums — or even more effectively, by presenting him with color reproductions of them to hang on his living room wall.

With television in so many homes, with libraries so numerous, with paper-back editions of the "classics" on hand at the nearest drug store, there is hardly an art work in the world of which a man cannot now gain a satiety almost for the asking.

With the result that "nerve unbalances" in relation to art have become so much a question of accidental irregularities, depending on which selection of "cures" men happen to have taken or failed to take, that the chances of critics' being able to deliver correct verdicts of "good" or "bad", *supposedly applicable to all men*, are so small as to be negligible — and, in fact, their efforts to do so come so close to downright fraud as to be indistinguishable therefrom.

No, the gradual transition of art criticism from a quackery to a legitimate profession cannot much longer be delayed; and I suggest that its practitioners — as an extremely belated gesture of penitence for their long record of charlatanny — show some signs of cooperation toward that transition instead of (almost unanimously) fighting against it, tooth and nail.

* * * * *

Next, let's consider the method by which critics can make the transition.

It is simultaneously easy and hard.

It's easy, because the first step they must take can so plainly and simply be expressed in words — namely to throw away mysticism; admit the existence of fatigue and concentrate their efforts on such actualities and physical facts as are available. No three-year course in Hegelian or Crocean philosophy is necessary to comprehend such a procedure.

It's hard because the results will be extremely meagre at first; and because the supply of men willing to tackle the job and keep at it, regardless of disappointments and of the possible hostility of their colleagues, is small.

*Rather curiously, many critics despite their disapproval of ethical nihilism, take an opposite view. Art has nothing to do with morals or propaganda, they assert.

And it's hard, also, because it requires that critics adopt a new point of view towards art. They must abandon their present visualizing of themselves as *Art's Devoted Defenders*, so to speak, battling heroically against a horde of vulgarians of whom the extermination from earth (thus leaving themselves as earth's sole inhabitants) would be the best thing that ever happened. They must look on Art as simply one more phenomenon of life analogous to such other phenomena as gravity, heat, electricity, color, genes, anatomy, medicine and crime; and worthy of study and investigation for the same reasons that they are.

Critics are not the heaven-sent protectors (and perpetual adorers) of *The Alba Madonna*, *The Parthenon*, *The Pathetic Symphony*, or *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

They are the analyzers and manipulators of these (and other) art works as steps in man's progress and as expeditors of that progress. If there is any "crusade" involved at all, it is for the benefit of Man and not for the benefit of Art.

They must take for granted the non-endurance of art — and actually encourage it; because that non-endurance is essential to man's health and well-being.

In reality a man does not need a critic to tell him whether or not an art work is beautiful (or pleasurable) while he is perceiving it. His own senses are giving him that information. What he wants the critic to tell him is whether or not it will still be beautiful ten seconds, ten hours, ten years or ten centuries from now and how he can eventually absorb all its beauties (including any that the critic helps him to see) and then go on to the next art work.

The beauty of an art work in the past, or at the immediate present, is of no importance to the critic except for the information it furnishes as to what will happen in the future, just as which horses win or lose in the Derby is important to the gambler only as an indication as to how they will come out in later races.

A critic's first thoughts about an art work, therefore (after he has extracted from it his own individual pleasures — if any) should be directed to estimating its future prospects.

There are an infinite number of factors which determine that future. Any of them can be important *occasionally*, but only one is important *always* — speed of tiring.

Speed of tiring is important, first, because (as explained in Chapter X) it is the only factor (or quality) which belongs to the art work itself and because (like a Trade Wind or the the Gulf Stream) it is operating always in one direction. I shall therefore call it The Basic Factor — in any art work's future.

All other factors, harmony, rhythm, truth, "timelessness", (in the sense not of immortalism, but of the absence of any clue as to the date in history of its creation) profundity, brilliance, realism, morality, etc., do not belong to the art work itself and do not operate always in one direction. They are accidental factors, operating at random. I shall call them "Extraneous Factors".



Figure 11, Martha Washington, Stuart

Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

I think I can best illustrate by saying that the basic factor — speed of tiring — corresponds in its effect to the "loading" in a pair of loaded dice — which expresses itself — as you know — by being a continuous influence towards the dice coming up with two specific numbers on top.

Extraneous factors, on the contrary, correspond to the "accidents" (e.g. a collision of the dice with a foreign object, the pressure from a sudden gust of wind, or an unevenness of the surface on which the dice are thrown) which occasionally are strong enough to offset the tendency produced by the loading.

And since the extraneous factors, whether in art or in dice, have no built-in trend to push in one particular directions (as the basic factor has) then no matter how often they are powerful enough (by accident) to counteract the basic factor they cannot prevent the basic factor from prevailing *most of the time*.

Consequently, by placing his reliance on this basic factor a critic gives himself the best possible chance to make correct guesses as to an art work's future. Nothing else could do as well.

And lest you draw the impression that I shall be one-sided in proving the correctness of this statement let me start with a case wherein a critic by relying on this basic factor would come out very badly indeed.

I suggest that you examine Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Martha Washington, shown in Figure 11. It's a skilled and workmanlike job, I believe you will concede, and there is no reason why it shouldn't hold up against reiteration as well as nine out of ten portraits by other celebrated artists.

Now let me quote you a remark about it from a gallery lecture at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, on June 10, 1959.

"This painting", said the lecturer, "is very well known, unfortunately somewhat too well-known, because it was used on Martha Washington Chocolates. That is a very bad thing to have happen to a painting because it takes away from the interest of the painting when you see it thousands of times on a box of chocolates".

Extraordinary, isn't it! A candy manufacturer chooses a trade-mark for one of his products and suddenly the beauty (or pleurability) of a famous art work perishes.

And perhaps it is equally extraordinary to find this death so frankly reported from an art museum, wherein, as you know, *the immortality of art*, is Article of Faith Number One.

Especially so, since it was in this same museum (only a few months earlier) that another lecturer (see Page 2) described Caravaggio's painting, *Poppies in a Wine Flask* as "inexhaustible".

As to which of the two lecturers was telling the truth and which was merely reiterating an ancient banality I shall leave to your decision.

Any way you look at it, however, the fact remains that if some candy manufacturer should ever decide to market his brand of chocolates under the title of *Poppy Chocolates*, and should reproduce Caravaggio's painting on the box-cover thereof, the same thing would happen to Caravaggio's painting that happened to Gilbert Stuart's painting — taking for granted the chocolates were equally popular.

Select any art work you wish (e.g. Renoir's portrait of his wife, for use with *Earth Goddess Chocolates**) and the eventual result would be the same — although the length of time required to attain that result might vary according to the inherent speed of tiring of the art work itself.

An impregnable art work doesn't exist.

In support of which fact I call your attention to the following comment by the well-known critic, Lewis Mumford in his book, *Art and Technics*.

One of the real achievements of technics during the last half century has been to devise means of making color reproduction of pictures with increasing high fidelity. . . . As a result, for a small fraction of the price of an original painting . . . the ordinary citizen may have, as his private possession, a picture that in its original form was entirely beyond his reach, physically as well as financially. On the surface this seems an unalloyed triumph for the mechanical process. . . . But what, if you look closer, is the *actual* result? . . . that already, in big cities at least, there is a whole group of great pictures, so frequently reproduced, so often hung, so insistently visible, that they have forfeited, no matter how faithful the reproduction, all the magic of the original. We all have seen these pictures, but alas, once too often. When I was a boy such a picture was Sir Luke Fildes' painting of the benign bewhiskered physician visiting a sick child, a bathetic piece of popular art, whose

devaluation would now bring tears to no one's eye. But the same thing is happening again, because of the very raising of the level of popular taste, with paintings of the highest excellence. There are paintings by Van Gogh and Matisse and Picasso that are descending the swift, slippery slope to oblivion by reason of the fact that they are on view at all times and everywhere. And whereas, with every great work of art, the more one returns to it the more one sees in it, once one has reached a certain point of supersaturation, the result is the rapid effacement of the image: it sinks into the background: indeed it disappears. . . . The fact is that our reproduction facilities in the arts will be of human value, only when we learn to curb the flood of images and sounds that now overwhelm us, until we control the occasion, the quantity, the duration, the frequency of repetition, in accordance with *our* needs, with *our* capacity for assimilation. . . . Expressive art, just in proportion to its value and significance, must be precious, difficult, occasional; in a word, aristocratic. It is better to look at a real work of art once a year, or even once in a life time, and really see it, really feel it, really assimilate it, than to have a reproduction of it hanging before one continually. . . . The quantitative reproduction of art . . . has increased the need for qualitative understanding and qualitative choice . . . it has imposed upon us, in opposition to the duty to participate in mass-consumption, the duty to control quantity: to erect rational measures and criteria of value, now that we are no longer disciplined by natural scarcity.

It's an astounding example, I think, of the extremes of absurdity into which critics are driven in order to live up to their alleged "principles". Anything, no matter how silly, to defeat fatigue!!

* * * * *

The above-cited samples are illustrative of a very common type of "extraneous factor" — namely of a type which influences an art work's speed of tiring through the frequency of its perception.

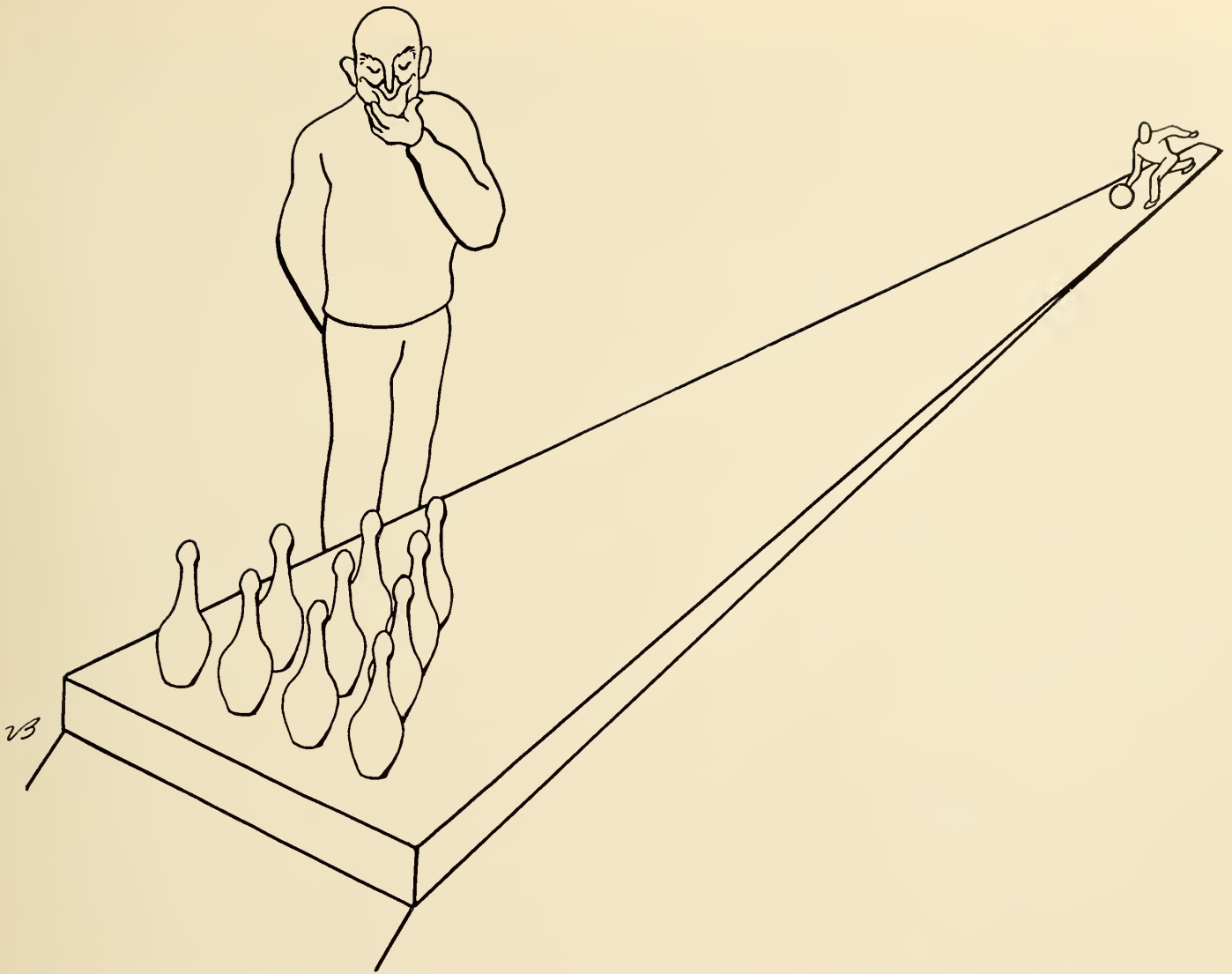
They come in innumerable sub-types, and can exercise a push either towards increasing or decreasing frequency of perception.

The principle of *majority rule*, for instance, tends to give an art work the amount of perception that suits the masses, thus starving the more cultured persons in the early career of that art work — *before* the masses have "grown up to it" — and surfeiting them of it later *after* the masses have "grown up to it".

The accessibility of an art work also immensely (and obviously) affects the frequency of its perception; and this accessibility is itself subject to sudden alteration due to improved travel facilities, wider distribution or better methods of manufacture.

Fads, fancies, publicity stunts, world's fairs, bigotries, censorship, population increases, better or worse schools and colleges, increases or decreases in man's leisure time, and a million other forces are similarly operative.

*See page 12.



To estimate the future of art works by concentrating on the art works themselves is as foolish as to estimate the future of bowling pins by noticing how neatly they are arranged and how firmly they are standing. What the world is going to do to them — and the art works — is eighty per cent the determining factor.

Still another important extraneous factor is Resemblance. An art work's prospects of retaining its attraction for the future can just as radically be altered by increasing or decreasing the frequency of the perception of art works closely *resembling* it as by increasing or decreasing the frequency of perception of the art work itself. Any trend of art, any reaction against academicism or any reversion (such as that of the Pre-Raphaelites) to an older style profoundly changes whatever resemblance relations had previously existed.

Well, this should be enough to picture for you the multiplicity of ways in which "extraneous factors" can defeat and frustrate the "basic factor" — speed of tiring.

And perhaps my picturing of the situation so frankly may have had exactly the opposite effect than that which I had desired — may have served, that is, only to make it more difficult for me to convince you that art criticism can be transformed from a quackery into a science.

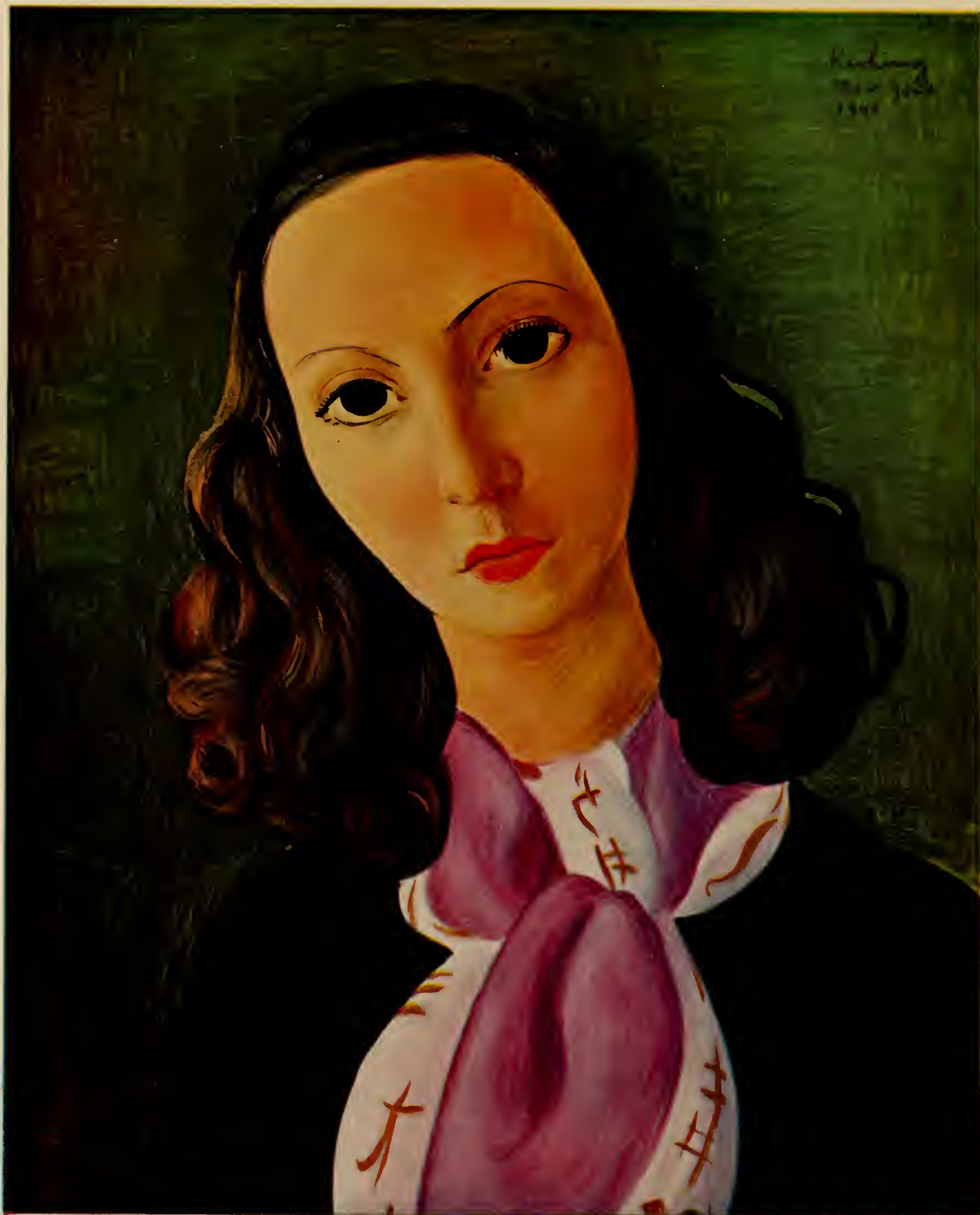
How would it be possible, you may ask, for a critic, with nothing to support him but that seem-

ingly weak "basic factor", *speed of tiring*, to stand his own against this army of "extraneous factors"?

The answer, as I have stated previously, is in the critic's reformation of his own character. He must cease to be the pedant, concentrating all his attention on the art work and on how much rhythm, unity, or harmony it possesses. He must stop worrying about whether the artist who produced it was actuated ("rightly") by the desire to "paint for himself alone" and thus search for "absolute beauty" or ("wrongly") by the desire to give pleasure to other people — including even those who had not attained nearly his height of aesthetic culture.

These interests of his have too close an affinity to those of a physician who was more concerned with his text-books than with curing the ills of his patients. The critic must step out of his hermitage and *learn his way around in the world*, in the same way that other men do — as a result of which process he will soon find himself going very light on positive assertions and taking it very easy before he makes predictions as to the "immortality" of art

(Continued on page 144)



Compare with Color Variants on pages 146 and 147



Compare with Color Variants on pages 150 and 151

(Continued from page 141)

works which his fellow-mortals chance to have created by bunching together the bits of knowledge appertaining to the particular century and the particular planet in which they were born.

Instead, he operates (as do his colleagues, the meteorologist and the physician) on practicalities — on careful diagnoses of individual cases and on making the best guesses he can as to what things are likely to happen in the future, according to his experience of what has happened in the past.

His errors will be numerous, of course, but they will be excusable, honest and curable — and in decided contrast, therefore, to the pedant's (or quack's) errors which he can't correct because they are tied in with his dogma.

Compare, for example, the difference of reaction of an honest critic and a quack to the above-reported "sad news" concerning the Gilbert Stuart portrait — both critics having previously, we will assume, predicted a rosy future for the portrait.

"How wrong I was on that one", the honest critic admits equably. "I'm sorry; but really how am I supposed to read a candy manufacturer's mind!"

And here's the quack reacting. "What's that you said?" (pause to gather his thoughts) "I didn't hear you. Please repeat that again". (another pause, during which he decides to bluff it out) "Oh, there's nothing to that yarn. It would be impossible. Any great painting is inexhaustible. Here, let me explain."

And does he explain? Never. He simply starts in — very fast and cockily — with his usual double-talk, as though nothing had happened. Almost incredible is it not, that a seemingly sincere man can thus degrade himself! But what other course is possible — short of confessing the fraudulence of almost everything he has written and said in the past?

Of course the honest critic made a mistake; there's no denying that. But it was a mistake — as he himself pointed out — which only a miracle-man could have avoided.

A similarly forgiving attitude could hardly be warranted, however, towards a critic who had not foreseen the possible decline on the "swift, slippery slope to oblivion" of paintings by Van Gogh, Matisse and Picasso to which (as quoted on page 140) Mr. Mumford has so regretfully (and belatedly) called our attention.

A general situation was involved here, pertinent to all paintings, and not an unpredictable accident, which could affect only one painting.

I would even say that any critic who, from the day of Daguerre onwards, had not realized the effect which photography would have on the art of painting — who had not realized, that is, that paintings would one day be so well and so inexpensively reproduced in color that the "beauty" and lasting power of any one of them could be radically reduced almost overnight — was too incapable of logical thought to regard himself as a critic.

And I would also say that any critic who, after being informed of the true facts by Mr. Mumford —

should continue to predict a high and enduring beauty for paintings by Van Gogh, Matisse or Picasso without having protected himself by making certain that his readers understood either that his predictions were valid only until color reproduction of the paintings had become excessively common, or were valid only because he had assured himself that these particular paintings (being secluded in the homes of private owners) would not be in danger of such immoderate display for many years; I would also say that any critic such as that was unreliable.

Or to pile on the pressure still more I would even assert that a critic was similarly unreliable if, in making his predictions about these or any other paintings, he had not informed his readers that such predictions were on the assumption that *close resemblances* to these paintings would not be given high enough circulation to have much the same damaging effect on the paintings as exact color reproductions of them would have.

The degree of that potential damage corresponds strictly to the degree of resemblance.

* * * * *

If your reaction here is that it would be completely impossible for critics to bring all these contingencies, hair-splittings, complications and distinctions into their job, I think you are wrong.

Critics have been suffering for centuries from imprisonment in a cramped area which might be named, ART BY ITSELF, or ART SEPARATED FROM PRACTICAL LIFE. It is shut in by an especially effective kind of wall — a wall whose surmounting (though physically easy) is against the rules of the game, so to speak, and supposedly constitutes a betrayal of their fellow-inmates.

Critics are hypnotized by it.

In actuality, an escape therefrom — though perhaps dangerous to a few (as is an escape from his cage to the canary) would, for the majority, and after the first shock, be an exhilarating and highly pleasurable adventure — an excursion into a fantastic new land, named ART JOINED TO PRACTICAL LIFE, of whose existence they had hitherto been unaware, wherein those art works which they personally had studied only when each had been neatly and statically isolated in its own little "glass case", were now romping freely around, in the open, according to their own natures, exchanging glancing blows (or head-on collisions) with their fellow art works, pushed herewards and therewards by extraneous forces, against which their own little "volitions" had frequently the resisting power only of the jelly-fish against the flood tide.

Once you get art critics out of their dream-world, and into this world of practicality, remembering (embarrassedly) their previous fatuities and bombast and determined not to backslide into them again, only one course is possible, namely to build a legitimate and practical Art of Criticism slowly, carefully, patiently — and resisting firmly the temptation to solve irksome problems by a lapse into mysticism.

With the examples of Meteorology and Medicine always before them it should not be too difficult.

Postscript: A Good Critic is a Good Gambler

I have been insisting, as you know, that art criticism is a science, just as are meteorology and medicine and that these three sciences have a very strong kinship to each other, in that they are sciences of conjecture, of estimating probabilities, of making good guesses, and *not* of certainties.

A very special type of man is obviously required for the operating of them, therefore.

He is not the positive, super-scholarly, punctilious chap (ideal, no doubt, for factual sciences such as chemistry, physics, botany, astronomy, etc.) who can be comfortable only when he is concerned with "eternal verities" and "immutable laws". He is rather the shrewd chance-taker, with a talent for sizing up situations and calculating the odds for or against certain outcomes of those situations. He resembles, in that regard, the successful stock-broker, real estate man or taker of polls — or even the smart third-base coach who, from his particular knowledge of the runner's speed and sliding-skill, and from his particular knowledge of the opposing right-fielder's throwing accuracy, decides whether to hold up the runner at third or let him try for home. But that is not all. Besides *being* a gambler he must *admit* he's one. If he doesn't do so — if he announces his guesses as "sure things" (hoping that they will turn out right often enough not to ruin his reputation as the "all-knowing one") he is still a faker, still conducting a quackery. He must explain his guesses, not deliver them from up his sleeve. He must take the public into his confidence as to the factors for and against his guess proving correct — and without arguing about it.

Let me illustrate by showing you how he would respond if a friend should ask him which was the better rendition of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*; the rendition on a Brand X phonograph record or the rendition on a Brand Y phonograph record. "Okay Bill, I'll try," he responds. "Assuming from the trophies I see you hanging on your wall that you have just returned from a hunting trip somewhere in the wilds and that there has therefore been a considerable time-lapse since you have heard any rendition of the symphony at all, my guess is that Record X is better. It is performed strictly in "the good old way," which would best satisfy the rather nostalgic desire for it, built up in you by your prolonged absence. On the other hand, if I am wrong in my assumption, and if, oppositely, you have been hearing the symphony frequently and always in the orthodox style, then I believe Brand Y is better. As to how you personally will react to the rather daring innovations it introduces, I can only surmise, but it may give you something more interesting to take note of than would a mere reiteration of the symphony in the standard formula.

"Brand Y", he continues, "has more high obtrusiveness in it than Brand X and would therefore tire you faster. But that isn't necessarily an objection. You merely *allow* for the faster tiring. Your best policy, I think, would be to keep both records in your stock. In that case — taking it for granted your temperament calls, say, for ten renditions of the symphony in the next year — my guess is that seven playings of the Brand X version against three of the Brand Y version would have the best chance of supplying you the mixture of emotional flavors that best suited you."

I have presented you with this rather elaborate (and perhaps extravagant) "criticism" partly because (in my opinion) it is so thoroughly the "right" and "legitimate" way to criticize, but even more because it would be so utterly impossible for a present-style critic to express himself in

such a manner. Not only would he strongly resent the introduction of so foreign (and even blasphemous) a concept as fatigue in connection with a supposedly "inexhaustible and imperishable" masterpiece such as the *Pastoral Symphony*, but he would be deeply scandalized at so aloof and neutral a treatment of the subject. His aesthetic credo would require him to squeeze out from somewhere a reason why one interpretation (Brand X, of course) was inevitably and indubitably the better — and no question about it.

Brand Y would be derided as a "pursuit of mere novelty", or as "a souped-up, hot-rod version whose excitement is thoroughly artificial."

And lest you might think that I am putting language into a critic's mouth that suits my purpose, let me state that the above phraseology is copied word by word from a scolding delivered by Herbert Kupferberg (in N. Y. Herald Tribune February 9, 1958) against Conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos' recording of Tchaikowsky's Sixth Symphony.

Obviously it's just a yanking-out of a few derogatory terms from Mr. Kupferberg's grab-bag of them, in order to demonstrate how inflexibly he's opposed to any but the one best way to perform the symphony. Exactly what kind of excitement is describable as "thoroughly artificial" is hard to say, but evidently it's a kind that Mr. Kupferberg doesn't think you ought to derive any pleasure from, under any circumstances whatever.

Well that's it. To the old-style critic a "truly cultured man" is forever chiseled into one granite-like mold. He has no moods, no shifting tempers. Remove him suddenly from his customary regimen of life; subject him for six months or six years to Regimen A, B or C and, regardless of how revolutionarily different the regimens may be, nothing is changed when he comes back. All the art works in the world still retain their previous relationships of superiority or inferiority.

No; art criticism cannot be conducted in that rigid, autocratic and all-or-nothing style. To persevere in the attempt is simply to confine it forever in its present state of quackery. It must be flexible, adaptive, responsive to changing conditions; as was the "sample criticism" I just concocted for you. To broaden out my "sample criticism" and make it applicable to mankind in general is not difficult. You have merely to picture my imaginary character, "Bill", as standing for a *group* of men, large or small, to whom your criticism is to be directed. Instead of the clue (about trophies on the wall) from which I attempted to visualize what had been happening to "Bill", you endeavor to discover similar clues which will tell you something about what has been happening to the group of people; and then with these clues (or observations) in your possession you make the best conjecture you are capable of as to what their responses would be to Art Works X, Y or Z.

Is this too vague for you? Must you have indubitable and inexorable verdicts? Then back you go to the mystic world of quackery! It's where you belong, absolutely.

And having adopted that policy, you may as well be consistent and embrace the quackeries of meteorology and medicine, too. Give your complete trust to the weather forecaster who predicts the exact temperature, wind velocity, barometer reading and humidity-ratio for the twenty-fifth day of the month after next, on which date you are scheduled, we will say, to paddle your canoe across the English

(Continued on page 148)





(Continued from page 145)

Channel, on a bet. Hand a hundred-dollar bill to the medicine-man in exchange for a pill which he assures you will "cure you of everything" for the rest of your life. Such actions would be only a shade more ridiculous.

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As soon as you insist that every great masterpiece of art must always be presented in its original—and supposedly best—form you are not only cramping art, but you are frustrating man. You are, as it were, allowing him to derive full enjoyment from art only on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays of each week, those being the days, we will say, on which the "great masterpieces" suited him best in their *orthodox* format. On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays he would either have to go without any art at all or be satisfied with what—to him, and on those days—was inferior.

To illustrate, I call your attention to the three pictures and the numerous color variants of them, reproduced on pages 56-57, and in this appendix.

In the case of the portrait (by Kisling) I have been rather conservative in my alterations (done mechanically, of course) because you can't give very fantastic colors to a face (if it's supposed to be at all realistic) without creating a "diseased" or "monstrous" effect which tires very fast. Nevertheless (granting that the original had been hanging in your living room for many months) there would be

occasions, I am confident, when one or the other of the two variants might have a greater attraction for you.

When you attempt variations for other types of painting, however, there is almost no limit to the extravagance of color changes which can be given—often with pleasing results. The more extravagant effects may possibly have a very high tiring-rate, but this may sometimes be offset by their acquiring a "bounce-back" capacity. By that I mean that a rest from them renews their attraction especially fast on account of the absence (due to their unconventionality) of high resemblances to them elsewhere.

I will even say that there is many a great masterpiece of art which if given such color variations as I have here presented to you, might find itself up against some very serious competition indeed from those variations.

But this is not the only lesson we learn. More significant is the fact that the preference for the picture in its original and supposedly best format can be destroyed not only temporarily but *permanently*. It could be done by taking the three most popular variants of the original, framing them together as a single art work (or triptych) and then subjecting the original to the competition of this triptych. Only one result is possible, I think, namely, the triptych would have a slower tiring-rate than the original and would gradually be regarded as being "usually the best".

In case experiments such as this seem abhorrent (even sacrilegious) to you I can only defend them by asserting that they help you to see the plain facts about art rather than a faked-up sentimentality about it.

That Vital Word "IF"

Stipulations are the essence of art criticism as they are the essence of Meteorology and Medicine.

"If my diagnosis is correct", says the doctor "these pills may help you; call me tomorrow if they don't."

"Unless the cold front moves down from Canada faster than now seems likely," says the weather-man, "we'll have fair weather for the next two days."

"There are a number of sources", says the art critic, "from which you may derive enjoyment in the performance of *Midsummer Night's Dream* now current at the Blank Theatre. One of them depends on your being a sufficiently expert judge of acting techniques to compare this performance with performances of the same play in previous years by other companies. To do so requires an excellent memory, of course, but if you have one, then you can interest yourself, for example, in whether Miss X's rather satirical interpretation of Titania is "better" than Miss Y's more "naive" interpretation; or you can ask yourself—if you think it important—which interpretation comes closest to what you believe was Shakespeare's concept. It's a rather "thin" kind of enjoyment and demands not only that you attend the performance more as a critic hunting for something to write about in your review than as playgoer, but also that you deliberately turn your attention away from what might be called the play's total impact and force it on incidental details. It can be done, as you will see by Mr. Stark Young's remark quoted herewith; but as I said it's a rather thin kind of enjoyment, and demands that you have very strong opinions as to the right and wrong ways of doing things.

A second source depends on whether your admiration for the "music" of Shakespeare's lines is powerful enough to offset the fact that the plot is extremely

simple, to offset the fact that you know in advance how it all ends up and to offset also the fact that Bottom's various slap-stickeries (including those involving the ass's head) tire sophisticated theatre-goers with almost lightning speed.

Still a third source of enjoyment depends on how great is your ambition to earn a high rating in the particular brand of "culture" now in vogue, which highly esteems, as you know, an aptitude for sprinkling your most casual conversation with Shakespearean allusions.

Without your having at least two of these sources to draw upon, my guess is that you would be as much bored by the play as I was.

Now, regardless of how low may be your opinion of the particular stipulations I have here employed it is still true that stipulations are the life blood of an honest art criticism, and that how an art critic handles them is a measure of his success.

Let me illustrate with examples.

A Wrong Way to Criticize

"His (John Barrymore's, as Hamlet) chief technical triumph, I think, lies in the absence from his work of all essentially theatrical faults. . . . There was no crawling forward on the floor to watch the king during the play, as so many actors have done; and none of Ophelia's peacock fan for Hamlet to tap his breast with, and fling into the air as Irving used to do." Stark Young, *Immortal Shadows*.

This is not really criticism at all, but what might be termed a "mood report", comparable to a man's remarking:

"I didn't feel like taking my usual walk yesterday", or "I've been bored and peevish all this summer; what I enjoyed last year I hate this year, and vice versa."

A Right Way to Criticize

On the same subject, thus:

As you can imagine, there is almost no limit to the ways an actor can conduct himself during any six minutes, say, in his portrayal of Hamlet. He can range from an extreme of nearly complete immobility to an opposite extreme involving a wide variety of facial expressions, vocal tones, hand-gestures and miscellaneous "stage business". John Barrymore's interpretation of the part was decidedly on the restrained side. For instance, he avoided crawling forward to watch the king during the play, as so many actors have done; and Ophelia's fan, which Irving used to tap his breast with and fling into the air, was not present. To my taste. . . .

[and then he selects for his conclusion whichever one of the following clauses (if any) chances to express his feelings on the occasion]

- a. the absence of the fan was excellent, but I missed the crawling forward.
- b. the absence of the crawling forward was excellent but I missed the fan.
- c. both gags are extremely effective.
- d. both gags are terrible.

When you read criticism in this tone you know that you are hearing from a sincere man, not a pretender.

* * * * *

Of course the critic is already using stipulations, but only to a limited extent and in what might be termed a sneaky way.

For example, when the New York drama critic delivers his verdict of good or bad it is done with the stipulation (whether he admits it or not) that his verdict is directed towards what might be described as the typical New York theatre-goer. He does not have to explain that his criticism is not meant for Zulus, Eskimos or Madagascans, who though potentially of equal intelligence have not developed that intelligence in the New York direction.

Nor does he feel it necessary to explain that, in advising his readers to attend a certain play, it is with the understanding that they have not already seen it.

Stipulations of that kind are taken for granted.

And similarly, the literary critic who writes for a magazine with a small circulation among super-highbrows is saved from the necessity of making it clear, in advance, that his decisions are intended specifically for extra-well-educated men.

This would be all very nice if the critic were honest about it. Unfortunately he isn't. Instead of coming out openly and acknowledging the existence of the stipulation he acts as if it weren't there at all. Instead of being thankful for having been automatically saved this much stipulating—and for the opportunity it gives him to bring in new and subtler stipulations—the ungrateful chump turns it the other way and delivers his adjudications with all the more audacity.

He says to himself: "We've got rid of all the ignoramuses now and it's just we connoisseurs and master-minds here together, so let's go."

What he has failed to realize—as I pointed out in Chapter XIII—is that you don't get more and more conformity of opinion as you move upwards in sophistication, but less and less. It's among the greenhorns that you find the greatest agreement as to what is "good" and "bad." In fact it wouldn't be too difficult to group the world's lowbrows into as few as ten general classifications, whereas for highbrows you would need a hundred times that number.

If critics were not off on a wrong trail (into mysticism) they would realize this fact; and when stipulations were handed to them without charge, so to speak, they would use them to branch out more adventurously into the *general field of stipulation* instead of wrapping the cloak of infallibility tightly about them and oracularizing with even greater bigotry.

"Up to now", they would say, "I have been discussing this art work in relation to men of types B, J and M who have been living 'normal' lives. Next, let's consider a man of type Q who has recently been subjected to a rather unusual sequence of events." And then they would go into whatever complications of classifying men into types they thought would be interesting to their readers.

That's the way the honest critic talks and let me assure you that it's by a policy such as this that art criticism can move ahead and escape from its quackery. Not only does it give man a better understanding of the actualities of art but also a better understanding of his own (and everybody else's) psychology. He ceases to be a dummy on wheels, to be trundled blindly into the "proper" niche (or opinion) and made fast there. Instead he is merely handed a sort of travel-guide by the help of which he can map his own course.

* * * * *

Stipulations of the kind which I have suggested to you so far are applicable, of course, to the men who are encumbering our planet *at the present time* and to conditions which are prevalent here now.

As soon as the critic begins to look ahead into the coming years, decades and centuries the stipulations he needs in order to stay out of quackery multiply with dismaying rapidity.

Five stipulations (of things that must or must not happen) may be enough to protect him (if he is lucky) when he predicts that art work X will retain its "beauty" for a period of, say, three to six years ahead, but when he attempts guesses for thirty, fifty or a hundred years ahead, a bookful of them might not be too many.

Even occurrences which would be conceivable almost before the present century ran out—such as a college education being made available to all mankind; a television (of world-wide scope) being placed in every home; a complete communication being made possible between all races and civilizations—in a common language; would so broaden the range of art that what we now call art would hardly be recognizable as such.

Add to that the remoter, but still not impossible, eventuality of an increase in man's life expectancy to one hundred and fifty or two hundred years and a corresponding increase in his progression into complexity; picture him as speeding through space in his private air-ship, vacationing on the moon (or on a satellite recently put into orbit) witnessing six sunsets in a day, jumping back and forth, at will, between yesterday and today; fancy him as stepping on the gas, so to speak, in order to catch up with a sound which

(Continued on page 152)





(Continued from page 149)

he heard last week but wanted to hear again; visualize him as discovering — and even communicating with — forms of life completely unknown on our tiny globe; and then try to reconcile such a situation with an everlasting adoration for those art works which our pedants and dreamers have called immortal.

Although I have insisted throughout this book that the critic's effort to exclude fatigue from art criticism is absurd I have also been careful not to imply that letting it in makes everything dandy. Far from it. In the moment that a critic discusses the speeds of tiring of art works he has to discuss them in terms of *temporary* beauty rather than *permanent* beauty, which (though really more interesting) is very much more difficult; and worse still, he has to give up the concept of *Art as a Moral Force* — as a search for "basic truth" — as something that eventually is going to set the world completely right. In short, the critic tends to become a cynic, a doubting-thomas, a dream-destroyer, an unenthusiast; and it's not a popular role, I am compelled to acknowledge.

But have you ever heard a critic adopt an equal sincerity from *his* angle? Have you ever heard him say: "I'm sorry that I have to pretend that fatigue doesn't exist and hand you all the preposterous blarney about art which my doing so makes necessary, but if I didn't the idealists and theologians would be on my neck accusing me of every crime they could think of — including carnality and materialism. For you must remember that although it might not do any great harm *in art* to admit that man can tire of anything, it could do plenty of harm *in ethics* — or at least that's what the men in ethics think. So they naturally bring every bit of pressure they can against us to keep quiet on the subject. I realize the policy is gradually carrying us so deep into fakery and nonsense that it can't last much longer, but what can any one man do about it singly! I made the compromise with my conscience years ago and it's too late to change now!"

Have you ever heard him talk in so frank and straightforward a manner? Never; not for a minute! He's the omniscient one, always. Every word he utters is gospel truth.

Well, okay; but let me remind you of one thing, it's when a man is operating a quackery that a cocky tone of this kind is essential. Give him a legitimate business, based on something solid, and he's more than glad to argue pros and cons with you.

* * * * *

Once more let me deny any intention to cavil at ethics. I merely express a doubt that ethics is any better off with art criticism operating as a quackery than operating as a science. Ethics has survived alleged "conflicts with science" in the past and can do so again. Its eventual recognition of fatigue will not necessarily be more lethal than its previous recognition of "evolution". I suggest, therefore, that the men behind ethics remove their arm-lock from around art criticism's neck and let it run its own affairs hereafter. Doing so won't hurt them a bit when they get used to it. Ethics is indestructible; it's just a matter of adjustment.

In conclusion, I would like to refute an often-expressed theory that the bestowing of a permanent evaluation on

A Sharp Letter

Dear Critics: Please stop pretending that your reason for writing nonsense about art is to *protect me*. I know as well as anybody what tiring does, because it's what your hypocrisy is doing to me. So kindly stand on your own legs hereafter; I can get along very nicely without your assistance. Yours truly, HONEST ETHICS.

art works is warranted by the fact that there is frequently a long-lasting concurrence in those evaluations. Here is how one critic phrases it.

"To those who admit the objective existence of works of art but insist that their value is subjective, the question may be addressed, how can the surprising extent of the agreement which exists among human beings concerning the particular works of art which have been before the public for a long time be disposed of? [Nothing easier, as I show you below!] The number of persons now of any school or shade of belief who would deny the aesthetic value of the Parthenon . . . is extremely small if any such persons can be found."

James K. Feibleman, in *Aesthetics*

There is nothing in the least surprising in this allegedly "surprising" agreement. Out of any hundred art works which have "endured", there will be, say, sixty whose right to endure might be frequently questioned; thirty-five, whose right to endure would rarely be questioned, and finally a residue of five (let's call them Class A) whose right to endure would almost never be questioned. It's the natural — even inevitable — culmination, and nothing would be more surprising than an ending of this "merging" process before a Class A could appear. The correctness of the evaluation into Class A is not proved thereby, however.

* * * * *

Having, I believe, successfully repulsed this attack by Mr. Feibleman on subjectivism, let's examine, next, the accuracy of his opinion that it would be hard to find anybody who would deny the "aesthetic value" of the Parthenon.

Actually, I think the percentage of men who *out of their own spontaneity*, are pleasurably affected by the Parthenon — except as an interesting relic from the past — is very small. And in order to comfort those who in their hearts are conscious of this reprehensible lack of enthusiasm on their part and in order to encourage them even to come right out and acknowledge it, let me state firmly that their unenthusiasm is thoroughly justified.

The Parthenon by no means stands on the topmost pinnacle of beauty on which critics (always on the lookout for something *very old* to rave about, thus supporting their dogma of immortalism) have endeavored to nail it down. The obtrusiveness (and even monotony) of its encircling columns give it a high tiring speed and consequently low resistance to reiteration. So much so, indeed, that any number of architectural structures — from Chartres Cathedral down even to such highly practical creations as some of our office buildings or hotels — would succumb much less rapidly to the treatment I have given (on the opposite page) to the Parthenon than would the Parthenon itself.

(Parthenons, shown opposite, are from a reconstruction made by the Metropolitan Museum.)



Why Isn't This a Good Idea?

Assume that a certain man owns a valley which is reputed to be the most beautiful in the world, and assume that it is his life-ambition to construct houses in it which will be worthy of that outstanding beauty.

It's clear, is it not, that he is faced with an extremely difficult task? For he is well aware that even the greatest artists have sometimes failed in their endeavors to create beauty and have created only ugliness. So, let's suppose that rather than take any risk whatever — and bearing in mind that critics are unanimous in declaring the eternal beauty of the Parthenon — he decides to make all the houses in the valley exact replicas of it.

The result of his adopting this clever policy is what you see above, we will say.

A really striking vista, I feel sure you will agree; and you can easily imagine the thousands of tourists who will throng there for an awed and ecstatic look.

Delighted with his success, our benefactor then decides to carry his scheme still further; so he organizes a *Parthenon Society* (with branches in numerous cities) which is dedicated to the construction of similar projects throughout the world.

* * * * *

As I said: why isn't it a good idea? Although you yourself may not be interested in this question — because you can answer it too easily — you may enjoy trying it on some of your especially aesthetic and deep-thinking acquaintances and observing the assorted hems and haws, weasel words and quibblings by which they make it all clear to you.

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HYPOCRISY ABOUT ART, by the author of PRECIOUS RUBBISH

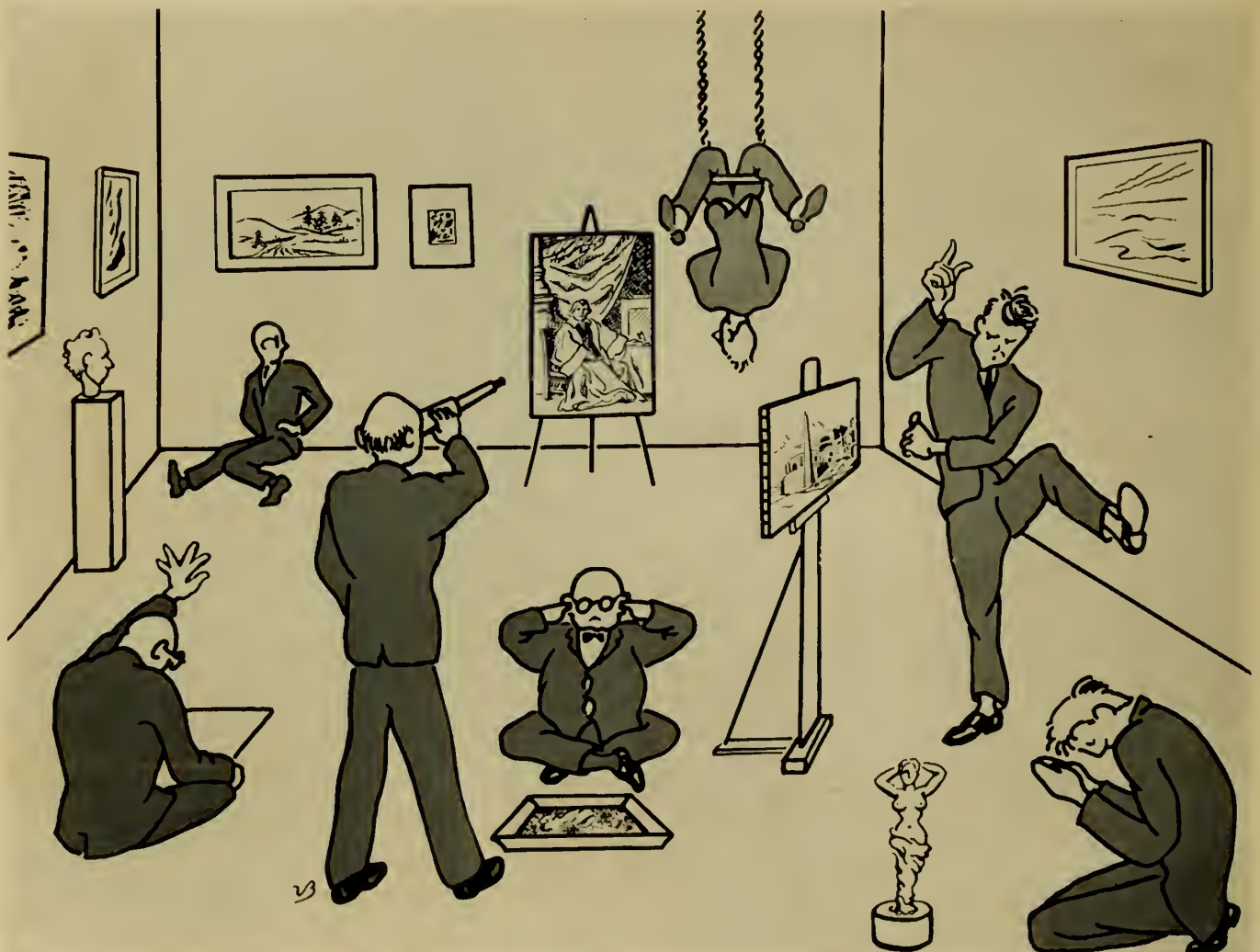
Every science, declares the author, starts as a quackery and transmutes into legitimacy only as the accumulation of knowledge makes it possible.

Art Criticism, he states, is now in a position to take its turn in making the transmutation and is being delayed in doing so only by the opposition of those who derive benefits from its present state of quackery.

Conspicuous among these obstructionists are critics and dealers, of course. They don't want any "practicalities" interfering with their allegedly "educated" evaluations. A few teachers, worrying lest their authority may be cramped—are also not overly enthusiastic. And finally, certain museums, fearful of their dogma of the "immortal art work" and fearful lest their right to spend a million or two dollars in buying one might be endangered, are likewise a bit conservative in their approval.

The author analyzes the various counter-arguments by which these "vested interests" are trying to prevent any changes being made and convincingly reveals their basic fraudulence.

However, the mere exposure of errors and hoaxes (flagrant and reprehensible though they may be) is his objective only to the extent that the exposure clears the way for building something better. His main effort is devoted rather to a careful presentation of the recent mechanical inventions, the improved techniques of psychological analysis, the expanding human horizon which have made possible (and even necessary) the graduation of art criticism from a quackery into a science; and he interestingly shows what will be the far-reaching consequences to the artist, the critic and the layman.



Critics trying to make themselves think art is immortal.

This is HYPOCRISY A, says the author; and the cartoon on page 97 illustrates a good cure for it.